Shadows of the Heart: A Crueler Mirror

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at https://archiveofourown.org/works/81927016.

Rating:	Mature
Archive Warning:	Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings
Category:	M/M
Fandom:	人渣反派自救系统 - 墨香铜臭 | The Scum Villain's Self-Saving System - Mòxiāng Tóngxiù
Relationships:	Original Luo Binghe/Shen Yuan | Shen Qingqiu, Luo Binghe/Shen Yuan | Shen Qingqiu
Characters:	Luo Binghe, Shen Yuan | Shen Qingqiu, Original Luo Binghe
Additional Tags:	Bingge vs. Bingmei Extra, POV Original Luo Binghe, Character Study, POV Multiple, Angst, Identity Issues, Jealousy, Alternate Universe - Canon Divergence, Sequel, Non-Con Due to Mistaken Identity, Mistaken Identity, Jealous Luo Binghe, Jealous Original Luo Binghe, Established Relationship, The Mortifying Ordeal of Being Known
Language:	English
Series:	Part 2 of Shadows of the Heart
Stats:	Published: 2026-06-12 Completed: 2026-06-13 Words: 43,762 Chapters: 6/6

Shadows of the Heart: A Crueler Mirror

by Kaiya12053

Summary

Bingge falls through a dimensional rift and lands in a version of his palace with no harem, one set of legendary sheets, and paintings on the wall that know things about his life no one should know.

Learning that the paintings were always of him was the revelation that healed everything for Bingmei. Except now the man those paintings literally depict is standing in his bedroom, and the paintings have never looked more like someone else.

Sequel to Shadows of the Heart (the one where SQQ makes fanart of LBH and it causes SO many misunderstandings)

Chapter 1: The Empty Palace

Chapter Notes

> Remember that little tease at the end of the epilogue? About a visitor from another dimension? Yeah. I thought it was going to be a fun little one-shot. A fun, cracky sequel based on the Bingge v. Bingmei extra. Maybe five thousand words, tops.
>
> I was wrong. It grew feelings. I went in planning comedy and and Bingge said no.
>
> Enjoy the angst, I guess?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The imposter had fought interestingly, for someone wearing his face.

Luo Binghe replayed it. The same reach, the same footwork drilled into muscle memory the hard way. He'd known in the first exchange exactly what he was looking at: himself, and yet not himself.

The imposter fought with technique — fluid, refined, the kind of precision that came from years of deliberate training rather than desperation. All those sharp, practiced movements that looked impressive against anything that wasn't him specifically.

Yet his own brutality underneath. The experience of the Abyss still visible in the foundation, even wrapped in something polished and controlled that Luo Binghe had never found the need to develop.

And the power. That had been unexpected. Something amplified beyond what bloodline alone could explain.

He had been waiting for the opening that always came, because every opponent had one, even versions of himself. *Especially* a version of himself. Luo Binghe knew exactly where his own defences thinned.

Then Xin Mo had lurched sideways through a dimensional seam that shouldn't have been there, and the choice of *when* had been made for him.

He recognised the palace immediately. Same outer walls, same cold stone, same inner gates angled for maximum psychological effect on anyone approaching with something to want. He knew this architecture the way he knew his own hands.

He walked the first hallway and it answered correctly: the echo of his footsteps, the particular chill of corridors designed to make people feel small.

And then — like the imposter, who had worn his face and his footwork and had still been wrong in ways Luo Binghe had felt before he could name them — the palace was wrong too.

The same, and yet not the same.

He turned toward the harem wing and stopped.

Silence.

Not the usual silence. Not the middle-of-the-night silence, when even six hundred carefully managed women finally slept. Total silence. The silence of a space that had never learned to be occupied.

He walked to the first door. It swung open to a chamber that was fully furnished, impeccably maintained, and utterly empty of any evidence that a human being had ever lived there.

The next chamber was also empty. As was the one next to that one.

He reached the end of the original wing and stopped.

The wall was there.

No archway cut through to the east corridor. He stood where the passage to his first renovation should have begun and put his hand flat against solid stone.

In his palace, this wall had been removed in the third year. The North Wing annex in the sixth. The whole Western Wing expansion had taken two years and housed, at last count, two hundred and forty women.

None of it existed here.

Just the original wing. A few dozen rooms, enough for a demon lord of modest ambitions. And all of them empty. Beds made with the crisp uselessness of furniture that had never been slept in. Vanity tables bare. One chamber held a vase with the calcified remains of flowers, petals long since powdered down to nothing.

A single trace of an intention that had been abandoned before it began.

The imposter never even started.

Luo Binghe stood at that blank wall for a moment longer. Then he went to find the private chambers.

His own chambers were simple by design. Nothing decorative, nothing unnecessary. The bed was sized for one, positioned against the wall with sight lines to every entrance. The desk was angled for working, not reading. No personal effects.

The chambers of the imposter told a different story.

Two sets of writing brushes on the desk. Two people working at the same surface. Outer robes draped over the back of a chair rather than put away. Another in a smaller size draped over the first.

A teacup with the ring of a recent drink still in it. A fan left beside it, its tassel worn smooth from habitual fidgeting.

In his palace, no one left a teacup. No one left a fan. His rooms looked exactly the same each morning as they had the morning before because they contained nothing that changed, nothing that accumulated, nothing that evidenced the presence of another person.

Here the evidence was everywhere. Here the evidence was the whole point.

The room smelled faintly of ink and something green, cedar maybe, or some cultivator's herb. It smelled like somewhere someone lived.

He saw two incompatible systems of organisation colonising the same bookshelves, each slowly overrunning the other's territory. One by subject, methodical. One by whatever had apparently caught the reader's attention last.

The bed.

Enormous. Piled with more pillows and quilts than any single person would require, more, in fact, than any two people would require, unless those people had made nest-building into a domestic project. One side slightly more nested, one pillow bearing the indentation of a head that had rested there recently. The sheets were rumpled, not made. Someone had left this bed this morning without straightening it, and no servant had been instructed to enter and correct the disorder.

He touched the sheets. Ran the fabric between his fingers — and stopped.

Is this Moonfire Silk?

He pressed the fabric more deliberately. The weight was right. The temperature regulation, the way the silk held the ghost of body heat even hours after its occupants had risen, was unmistakable. He'd handled Moonfire Silk exactly once. Had killed the Eclipse Moth queen for it. Had obtained enough for a single bed's worth of the material and had been, briefly, pleased.

The pleasure had lasted approximately four days.

The problem with possessing one set of legendary sheets and six hundred wives was mathematics. The political implications of which wife slept on the Moonfire Silk had escalated from pointed remarks to formal petitions to an incident involving two concubines, a pair of scissors, and a section of the east wing that required structural repairs. He had destroyed the silk himself, reduced it to ash in a fit of what his advisors charitably called pragmatism and what was, in truth, the cold fury of a man who could not have one thing without it becoming another front in a war he hadn't started.

Six hundred wives. One set of sheets. The mathematics never worked.

This version of him had Moonfire Silk on a bed shared with one person. No allocation crisis. No political fallout. No structural damage. Just silk and sleep and two bodies tangled together every night. And in the morning, no one made the bed because the only people who cared about the state of the sheets were the people who'd slept in them.

His thumb left a faint track in the fabric. He watched it slowly smooth itself out, the silk resettling, erasing his touch as though he'd never been there.

Then, he turned and saw the paintings.

He crossed the room without deciding to. Stopped in front of the first one.

The throne of bones.

He recognised it immediately: the precise arrangement of the remains of the old order, the deliberate architecture of intimidation he had spent three months constructing. Himself, seated. Robes arranged. The full weight of imperial authority in every line of his posture. The kind of portrait any emperor might commission.

He was about to move on when something caught his eye.

His right hand, resting on the arm of the throne. And there, almost too small to catch from any reasonable viewing distance, almost invisible unless you were the person whose hand it was —

The crescents.

Four small marks pressed into the meat of his palm, red at the edges, where his nails had gone through skin. Not deep enough to scar. Barely deep enough to bleed.

He had not been aware, in the moment, that he was doing it. Court had emptied. The last general had backed out with the appropriate degree of terror. The great doors had swung shut. And he had been alone with his throne and the silence of a completed conquest, and something at the base of his throat had asked a question that had no interrogative energy left by the time it formed.

Is this it?

His hand had clenched, and he had not noticed, and then a general had knocked and he had composed himself and the moment had passed the way moments did, buried under the next campaign.

He stepped back. Looked at the painting again.

The throne. The robes. The imperial spectacle. And his gaze kept returning to the four marks in the palm. As though the painting had a gravity and the hand was where it collected. As

though everything else in the frame existed to direct attention toward the one detail that should have been invisible.

No one had been in that room. The doors were shut.

And yet the marks were there. On silk. In paint. Permanent.

Something along his jaw tightened. He noted this.

Next to it was a smaller painting. More intimate in its dimensions.

A figure crouched near a fire — himself again, the face unmistakable — the flames rendered in meticulous gongbi detail. Beautiful work. Technical work.

He knew this fire.

He knew the specific size of it — small, contained, built with intention. He knew the hour. The artist had rendered just enough sky at the upper edge — a thin line of grey where the dark was beginning to give way, the last stars still visible but fading. Before dawn. The kind of dark that felt private.

He knew what his hands had been doing.

The thought hit a wall he had not known was there — or had always known was there and had built so long ago that it had become indistinguishable from the landscape. He could see the fire, the figure, the specific angle of the body bent toward the flame. Could feel the memory pressing forward and meeting the wall and pressing and pressing and —

He stepped back from the painting and his hands were fists at his sides.

No one knew about this. He had made certain. Had gone to a place no one would think to look, at an hour no one would be awake.

There were sculptures on the shelf beside the desk.

Two of them. The first was small, palm-sized, full-body. Him again, every detail rendered in three dimensions. But different from the paintings — the lines slightly less certain, the kind of imprecision that came not from lack of skill but from working from memory rather than study. From reaching for something you knew but had never stood close enough to measure.

Someone had made this from the inside of their own head.

The second was larger. A bust: head and shoulders, rendered at a scale that allowed for detail the smaller figure couldn't hold. The craftsmanship was finer here, the hours more visible. The jawline was right. The set of the mouth was right.

The eyes were wrong.

Softer than he actually made them. Not by much; someone unfamiliar with his face might not have caught it. But he was intimately familiar with his face, and these eyes were not his eyes. They were the eyes of someone the maker believed he was. As if, in the act of shaping, something had intervened between intention and execution. Some tenderness that had no business in a rendition of the demon emperor and had gotten in anyway, through the fingers, without permission.

The maker had looked at his cold mask, the imperial bearing, the face designed to make people flinch — and their hands had said: *but I think his eyes are kinder than that.*

He picked up the bust. The weight of it settled into his palms. The wrong-soft eyes looked back at him — the face of a man he had never been and someone had believed he was.

Something was happening behind his ribs. Not the tightness from before. Something older. Something that was pressing upward from a place he had not examined in decades, and the pressing was not stopping, and he did not have a name for it, and he was not going to look for one.

He set the bust down. Carefully.

He heard footsteps in the corridor.

The door opened.

Luo Binghe knew this face.

He *knew* this face. Every angle of it, every line. The face of the man who had locked him in a woodshed and had beat him and looked at him with contempt so total it had taught a child exactly what he was worth. The face that screamed in pain, later, in a room designated for the purpose of tearing the man apart with the methodical precision of a someone who had learned that contempt from the inside and was returning it with interest.

The face had looked at him with terror, which was correct, which was what that face deserved, which was —

This face was not afraid.

This face was looking at him with an expression he could not immediately categorise because it did not exist in his experience of this face. The eyes were warm. Unguarded. The mouth carried the edge of a smile that was clearly habitual — the expression of someone who walked into this room expecting to find a person they were pleased to see. No defensive posture. No calculation.

Shen Qingqiu had always been beautiful. That beauty had been a weapon, a cold, immaculate thing, maintained like a blade edge. Luo Binghe had hated the beauty the way he'd hated everything about that face: thoroughly, and not entirely honestly.

This was the same face. The same bones, the same angles, the same mouth. And the beauty was unrecognisable.

Not because it was diminished. Because it was unlocked. The warmth in the eyes did something to the architecture of the face that cruelty had never permitted — softened the jaw, eased the mouth, turned the elegance from porcelain to something lived-in. The damp hair against bare skin. The flush still lingering from the bath. The loose robes and the bare feet that said *I am home.*

He had six hundred wives. He had catalogued beauty across three realms with the efficiency of a man conducting an inventory. None of it had looked like this — like something that existed for its own sake rather than for use.

And underneath the warmth — aimed at him, landing on him, because this person thought he was the one who belonged here — something that Shen Qingqiu's face had never directed at Luo Binghe.

Adoration.

Not desperate. Not calculating. Worn into the muscles of a face through repetition, the way a path wore itself into a hillside. Habitual. Involuntary. The kind of expression that took years to build and that the person wearing it probably didn't know was there.

Shen Qingqiu looked at him the way no one had ever looked at him.

And he was wearing the face of the person who had taught Luo Binghe that no one ever would.

Shen Qingqiu emerged from the bath with the bonelessness that came from water heated by demonic energy arrays. He'd spent an indulgent amount of time in there. The palace baths were obscene, and Shen Qingqiu had long since stopped pretending he wasn't deeply, embarrassingly attached to them.

He towelled his hair without enthusiasm. Let it hang wet against his neck and shoulders. Inner robes, loosely tied, the silk catching on skin that was still warm from the water, clinging in places that would have been improper if anyone besides his husband were going to see him.

Nobody besides his husband was going to see him.

He padded barefoot through the private corridors toward their chambers. The stone was warm underfoot, another array, because apparently the demon emperor's palace had opinions about foot temperature, and pushed open the door.

Binghe was standing in front of the paintings.

Ah.

Shen Qingqiu's body reacted before his mind did. A low, pleasant tug below his navel. A slight acceleration of pulse. His skin, still flushed from the bath, prickled with awareness.

He's doing the thing.

Shen Qingqiu had catalogued the thing with the meticulous attention to detail he'd once reserved for dissecting PIDW plot inconsistencies in forum posts. The thing had phases.

Phase One: the staring, the reverent stillness, the fingers tracing a frame.

Phase Two: the murmuring — *you painted me, all this time, you were painting me* — said with the hushed wonder of a man who still couldn't quite believe it.

Phase Three: the turn, the wonder giving way to something darker and hotter, possessive in the way of a person who had spent years believing these paintings were for someone else and was now categorically certain they were for him.

Phase Four: the approach. The *I am about to do something devastatingly romantic and you cannot stop me* stride. Would pull Shen Qingqiu against him and say something so earnest, so nakedly worshipful, that higher cognitive functions simply evacuated the premises. Something like: "Every painting is proof that I was loved before I knew I was worth loving." Or, voice cracking mid-sentence: "I spent years convinced I wasn't enough. And your hands knew the whole time —" The rest too quiet to hear.

Or, on one memorable occasion, eyes dark and voice dropped to a register that should have been illegal: "Watch my face, Shizun. Tonight I want you to watch closely — every expression, every moment — so you remember it for the paintings. And if you need me to keep going until it's seared into your memory, I will. As many times as it takes."

(Shen Qingqiu had needed to sit down after that one. For approximately forty-five minutes. Binghe had been very helpful about providing a surface. The surface had been Binghe.)

Phase Five was not something Shen Qingqiu was going to enumerate in his internal monologue because he had some dignity left. Technically.

His body knew this script. Was already responding to the visual of Binghe standing before the paintings, still, focused, the lamplight catching the planes of his face. He walked up behind him. Placed his hand on that broad shoulder, casual, domestic. His still-wet hair brushed against Binghe's arm.

"Admiring yourself again?" he said, and let the fond exasperation into his voice because it was always there anyway.

The figure under his hand went rigid.

Not the small startled tension of someone pulled from a reverie. *Rigid.* Every muscle locking simultaneously, a full-body response to being touched that Shen Qingqiu had not felt from this body since —

Since the early days. Before we —

He frowned.

"Binghe?"

A pause. Then: "Tell this Lord about these paintings."

Shen Qingqiu's anticipatory warmth hit a wall.

This Lord?

Binghe hadn't called himself "this Lord" at home since the week they'd moved in together. He had gone the colour of a ripe tomato attempting to maintain the imperial register while Shen Qingqiu was reorganising the bookshelf in his inner robes. The imperial third person had not been heard within these walls since.

Is this a curse? Did someone at court hit him with some kind of formal-register-inducing spiritual attack?

Is this... a roleplay?

The thought arrived and made itself very comfortable.

Because the thing was — and he was going to examine this later, in private, possibly never — the "this Lord" thing was... not entirely unwelcome. The cold authority layered over the familiar face. The formal register in the intimate space.

It was doing something for him.

He was not going to think about what it was doing for him.

Whatever this is — curse, roleplay, demonic mood — what happens next usually cures all ailments and I am not opposed to trying new things.

"Again?" he said, and his voice was impressively steady. "You've heard this story before."

"Tell this Lord again."

Committed. Fine.

He shifted his weight to face the paintings, shoulder still close enough to brush against Binghe's arm.

He settled into the practised cadence: the Seer's voice, measured, careful. The performance of someone recounting rather than remembering.

"I'll start with the one you're standing in front of."

The throne of bones.

He looked at it, and the memory that surfaced was his apartment. Two in the morning. The glow of a laptop screen and a chapter he'd read three times because Airplane had done the thing Airplane only ever did by accident — the prose had gone quiet. One passage. The demon emperor alone on his throne after the court emptied, his right hand closed on itself, nails breaking skin. Shen Yuan had copied that sentence into a file on his desktop and highlighted it and sat with it for a long time.

"When I first saw this vision," Shen Qingqiu said, "it wasn't the throne I noticed first. It was the room. How empty it was. A court designed for a thousand, and no one in it."

He could feel, without looking, the quality of attention beside him change. Something heavier than politeness.

"But that's not why I painted it."

A pause. The stillness sharpened.

"I saw your hand," he said. "The right one. I painted this twice before I got it right, because the first time it looked like authority — a fist of command. But that wasn't what I saw." He let himself look at the painted hand the way he'd looked at it when he made it. "What I saw was a man whose body knew something his face wasn't ready to admit."

Luo Binghe's right hand had curled into a fist. The fingers pressing into the palm. The unconscious repetition of the gesture from the painting — the gesture from the empty throne room when the doors were shut and no one was watching.

"What I saw," Shen Qingqiu continued, his voice shifting warmer, less measured, "was a man who had just gotten the only thing he'd built everything toward, and found it didn't fill what it was supposed to fill."

Luo Binghe's fist tightened. The crescents met the same places they always met.

"His hand closed on itself and broke skin. And he never looked at his palm after. He didn't want to see what his body already knew."

His throat closed. Not metaphor. The muscles contracting, the airway narrowing. He breathed through it because Luo Binghe had survived worse than being described.

"I looked at it," the voice said, softer now. "In the vision. I saw what he didn't let himself see. So I painted it."

He should say something. Should redirect, reassert control.

"Anyone can build a throne. That hand is the real record. Of what it cost."

The fist opened. One finger at a time. Slowly, as though the hand had forgotten it was holding on.

"Why?"

Shen Qingqiu heard it and felt the evening tilt on its axis.

"Because I couldn't stop thinking about it," he said, and his voice had gone somewhere he hadn't authorised — quiet, bewildered, the register of a person confessing something they hadn't fully understood until they said it out loud. "That detail. The hand. It stayed with me. I kept — it wouldn't leave. And eventually the only thing I could do with it was paint it."

The silence after was long enough to have weather.

Something shifted after that. Not the register — *this Lord* held, the imperial cadence intact on the surface. But the questions changed. As though the first answer had opened something and now the questions were coming from behind it, precise and relentless.

"What else did your visions show?"

And Shen Qingqiu — constitutionally incapable of passing up an opportunity to demonstrate comprehensive knowledge — told him.

The Western Campaign — thirty thousand troops converging on the Jade Passes, the three-month standoff that ended not with a siege but with a single night ambush that broke the coalition from the inside. Shen Qingqiu described it with the relish of a person who had opinions about military strategy and insufficient people to share them with.

No one had ever asked Shen Qingqiu about the paintings like this. Not the devotion, not the *you painted me*. The content. The history. The specific, granular detail. He never asked *what was happening in this scene.* He never pressed for the details of campaigns and conquests and the hollowness after.

This was different. Every answer met with another question. Not challenging. *Hungry.* As though each answer made the next question more urgent rather than less.

The pleasure of being listened to was pulling words out of him that the painting script had never touched.

"How much of this Lord's life did your visions show?"

"Enough." The Seer answer. Then, because the conversation had gotten under his guard: "More than anyone should have to carry alone."

He hadn't meant to say that.

"You knew what this Lord was feeling." Not a question.

"Yes," Shen Qingqiu said. Simply. Because lying about that, after the throne painting, was no longer something his voice was willing to support.

"Every victory was the same, wasn't it?" he added, and the fondness was there now — unhidden. "The hollowness after. Always the same size."

Binghe's gaze moved to the fire painting. Stayed there.

"And this one." Still quiet. Still controlled. But the control had a seam in it. "When did this happen?"

Shen Qingqiu looked at the fire painting and felt the ground shift under him — further than before, further than he could correct for.

"This one was harder," he said. "To paint. Not technically. It was harder because of what I was looking at."

The memory was a different chapter — much earlier in the novel. Three sentences about Luo Binghe alone before dawn, burning paper offerings for a washerwoman who had died when he was seven. Shen Yuan had read those three sentences and gone very still. Then he'd opened his notes file and typed: *he still remembers. underneath everything. he's still in there.*

"The vision came to me at night," Shen Qingqiu said. "A small fire. Before dawn — you could see it in the sky, the dark just beginning to give way. A place no one would think to look. An hour no one would be awake."

The body beside him had stopped breathing.

"You were burning paper." Quiet. Careful. "Offerings. Paper coins. Paper fabric. Things a son would bring to a mother who had died when you were young."

The word *mother* landed in the place behind the wall.

Luo Binghe had not been able to think it in front of the painting. Had stood there and looked at the fire he knew and the hour he knew and the figure bent toward the flame that was him, and the wall had held. The word had stayed behind it. Locked. Contained.

The voice had said the word he could not think.

Had said it with tenderness. Had made *mother* sound like something worth keeping — not a weakness, not a fracture in the architecture of the emperor, but a thing that deserved more care than the throne.

"No one was meant to know."

"And yet you saw it."

"Some visions arrived whether I wanted them or not. This one stayed with me differently."

A pause. Then, quieter:

"I painted it because the vision wouldn't let me go. The way you were bent toward the fire — not commanding. Not the emperor. Just bent toward. As if sheltering the flame mattered more than anything you'd ever conquered."

He was aware that his fingernails had broken skin. Both hands. The crescents again.

"You were so careful." Closer now — or he had moved closer — or the distance between them had simply ceased to function. "With the fire. With the paper. As though the ritual mattered in a way the campaigns never did."

"I thought this deserved to be kept. Even if no one would ever see it."

A breath. And then:

"I saw all of it. The whole life. The throne, the wars, the empire, six hundred wives —" The voice cracked on the number. "And underneath all of it, just — this. A man by a fire. Alone. Still remembering."

"I was already grieving for you," the voice said. Almost a whisper. "Before any of it happened. While you were still whole. I could see what was coming and I couldn't stop any of it."

A pause. The voice breaking, slightly, in a way that was not performed.

"The Abyss. When I saw that vision — what it would do to you — I knew. That was where the boy died. Not the body. The boy. The one who loved without limit, who brought congee and believed that if he was good enough it might be enough. That boy went into the dark and didn't come out."

Something in Luo Binghe's chest caved inward. Not pressing up. The ground itself — giving way.

"And I looked for him," the voice continued. Softer now. "In every vision after. Every conquest, every campaign, every empty throne room."

A hand moved — not at one painting but at all of them. A sweep that took in the throne, the fire, the smaller studies, the bust on the desk. Every piece in the room.

"The siege at Zhao Hua, the night before the Western Campaign, the morning after the Three Realm Summit — I painted every moment I could find him. A moment where the composure slipped. A gesture the emperor wouldn't have chosen. Anything." A breath. "I never stopped looking. Because I believed he was still in there. And these paintings were how I held on."

"But that's not who you became." A quiet smile. He could hear the smile without turning. "You're here. I'm here. We chose each other, and the visions were just — visions."

A body leaned against his arm. A small, habitual pressure. The casual weight of a person who touched someone they loved whenever they wanted because they could, because it was allowed.

"We're happy, Binghe."

This should have been yours.

The thought detonated.

The full weight of it — the one person who had seen the fire, who had painted the hand, who had found the boy crouching alone in the dark and thought *this deserves to be kept*. Leaning against his arm. In damp hair and loose robes. Close enough that the warmth of the bath was landing on his skin like something he was not supposed to have.

Luo Binghe had never been lucky. Not in the things that mattered.

He came home one day and his mother was dead. A washerwoman. Poor, tired, worn down to nothing by a life that had never been easy. He had been too young to understand that people could simply stop being alive, and he had stood in the doorway and waited for her to get up, and she hadn't gotten up. His teacher was cruel. Not indifferent, not merely cold, but cruel, with the specific cruelty of a man who saw a child's need for approval and chose to punish it. The one keepsake his mother left him — a jade pendant, fake, worthless to anyone but a boy who had nothing else — was taken by a senior disciple who thought it was funny to watch him beg for it back.

His first time — the thing other people spoke about with tenderness, or at least warmth — was a girl with poison in her blood and his cure in his body. She had been dying, technically. The dual cultivation had saved her, technically. And he had been young enough and desperate enough for any kind of touch that the technicalities hadn't mattered — only the girl who needed him, the urgency of it, the brief and devastating illusion that his body could be something other than a weapon. She lived. She had gotten what she needed. The memory sat in his body like a bruise that never surfaced and never healed.

Five years in the Abyss. His body destroyed and remade. Every soft thing stripped and replaced with something harder, something that could kill and fuck and feel nothing while doing either. Five years of darkness, surviving on spite because no one had given him anything gentler to survive on.

And after all of it — after the empire and the six hundred wives and the three realms — he had never once felt satisfied. Had sat on the throne and waited for the emptiness to fill and it never did. Had taken wife after wife and waited for the touch to mean something and it never did. Had conquered everything available to conquer and understood, somewhere he refused to examine, that the thing he was actually looking for wasn't on any battlefield and couldn't be taken by force.

Everything else in his life had been almost effortless. Opponents fell. Realms bent. Power accumulated as though destiny had looked at his life and decided to compensate. Had given him everything in abundance — piling triumph on triumph, as if sheer volume could fill the space that none of it touched.

He understood now what the compensation was for. What the empire and the wives and the treasures had been the replacement for.

And the replacement hadn't worked. Had never worked. Had never come close to the real thing.

Because Destiny had given the real thing to someone else.

The imposter had done *nothing* to earn it. Nothing. Had simply been born into the right world with the right teacher and had received — as a gift, as a birthright, as effortlessly as breathing — the devotion that Luo Binghe's centuries of survival had inspired. The imposter hadn't sat on the throne of bones. Hadn't built an empire from spite and fury and the hollow space where *this* was supposed to go.

The imposter got the warmth. The leaning with the expectation of transaction. The look of pure adoration with no ulterior motives. The Moonfire Silk and the messy room and the life — the whole soft, unearned, impossible life.

While Luo Binghe — the one whose loneliness had moved a stranger to pick up a brush — stood in the room where the evidence hung on the walls and received nothing.

No one had ever looked for Luo Binghe.

Not truly. His generals saw a weapon. His wives saw opportunity — six hundred faces reading the room for advantage, arranging themselves into whatever shape might earn a night, a favour, a fraction of the power he radiated. His enemies saw a threat to be neutralised.

Even Ning Yingying — the girl from the sect, the one who had actually known the boy, who had shared meals with him and laughed at his jokes and cried when he fell — even she had stopped looking. He'd watched it happen. The softness draining from her eyes over the years, replaced by something careful and distant, the way you looked at a place where a person used to be. She looked through him now. Past the mask to nothing, because she had accepted that the mask was all there was.

Everyone had accepted it.

Only this person — from another world, through visions, armed with nothing but a brush and the stubborn refusal to believe the boy was gone — had searched. Had collected the moments where the composure slipped like proof of life from a disaster zone. *He's still in there. Here — and here — look, the boy survived —*

Had never stopped.

You never stopped looking for me.

And that had come first. Before the imposter existed to receive what the searching and the finding had produced.

This was what destiny had been compensating for.

Why wasn't it me?

A child's question. Unanswerable. The voice of the boy in the woodshed who had done everything right and had still been the one locked in the dark.

And Shen Qingqiu was still leaning against his arm.

His skin burned where they touched. Not pain — the return of sensation after long numbness, indistinguishable from injury. He wanted to turn. Press his face into that damp hair and breathe until the burning stopped — or didn't stop. He would take the burning. Would take any amount of this if it meant the warmth stayed.

He wanted to put his mouth on the place where Shen Qingqiu's pulse beat against the thin skin of his throat and feel the proof that this person was alive and real and here.

He wanted to say: *the one you were looking for. I'm here. Alive under the mask. Just like you believed.*

He wanted to say: *why wasn't it me.*

The boy was pressing his face against the woodshed door, and on the other side was warmth and the scent of ink and tea and a voice saying *I never stopped*, and the warmth was bleeding through the wood into his skin, and the feeling was worse than the cold because the cold was familiar and the warmth could be taken away.

But right now it was here. Right now a person was leaning against him and the paintings were on the wall and the evening smelled like home.

Luo Binghe turned. His hands found Shen Qingqiu's shoulders — not gently, not with any care he recognised as his own — and pulled him in, and the wanting that had been pressing upward through decades of frozen ground broke the surface and reached.

Chapter End Notes

Bingge: Tell this Lord about these paintings.
SQQ: ...
SQQ: [new kink unlocked]
SQQ: this is going in the folder...

SQQ's response to his husband developing a sudden case of cold imperial authority was not "are you okay" but "oh, we're doing this now?"

Chapter 2: It Should Have Been Me

Binghe turned and kissed him.

Phase Three. Ahead of schedu—

Oh.

Phase Three normally came with a table of contents. A three-act structure. Binghe, who planned dinners with the seriousness of small military operations, had a stage-by-stage escalation routine he followed so reliably that Shen Qingqiu could have graded it. First the hand on the lower back. Then — customarily — the kiss against the corner of his mouth before the real one. Then the apologetic inquiry into whether Shizun was certain he was not too tired, which was always the last thing Binghe said before becoming entirely unapologetic about anything.

The kiss currently happening was not in the usual three-act structure.

And Bingge was kissing him hard. Harder than usual. Mouth hot and open and claiming, hands pulling him in with an urgency that bypassed preamble entirely — and Shen Qingqiu's whole body responded before his mind could catch up. Heat flooding down his spine. His fingers curling into the fabric of Binghe's robes, pulling instead of thinking, his mouth opening under the pressure because his body knew this script even when the tempo was wrong.

— oh —

His back hit the wall. Binghe's full weight pressed him into it — chest to chest, hips to hips — and the low sound vibrating against his mouth was less a kiss and more an act of consumption. Shen Qingqiu's pulse hammered and he could feel Binghe's heartbeat through their robes, fast and hard.

His hands found shoulders — broad, tense, radiating heat through silk — and held on. Because whatever this was — gods. Not the polished intensity of their usual evenings. Something rawer. As though this kiss were the first thing he'd been given in — Binghe trying to press himself into Shen Qingqiu's body through sheer proximity, close enough meant inside, meant safe, meant something the kiss itself couldn't carry.

He hadn't felt Binghe this desperate since the first time. When they only had two hours. With the confession still wet on both their faces and Binghe's hands shaking so hard he could barely find the ties, and even then — even with years of want finally breaking its banks — there had been a tenderness underneath. A carefulness. The earnest, needy, *am I doing well? is this good? do you want more?* that lived underneath every touch his husband offered — as though Shen Qingqiu's pleasure were a test he was desperate to pass, a student who had never quite stopped seeking approval even after he'd surpassed every master he'd ever had.

This was uncontained — the urgency of someone who was not handling the wanting with care because they had never learned that the wanting could be handled with care. It was Binghe's desire stripped of every gentleness his Binghe had been taught, and the rawness of it was —

— *folder,* his brain supplied helpfully. *Going in the folder. The one that does not exist. The one that lives in the same drawer as "this lord" and the figurine with the mood lighting.*

The sounds alone. Low, rough, more growl than groan — the sounds of someone operating below the level of language. Hot. Devastatingly, ruinously hot.

"Binghe," Shen Qingqiu breathed against his lips. "Not that I'm complaining, but you're being very —" A hand slid up his spine and whatever word was supposed to follow evaporated. "— intense tonight."

Something happened at court. The thought surfaced with the dim, detached logic of a mind that was mostly offline. *Someone challenged him, or insulted him, or looked at him wrong, and now he's working it out with his mouth on my —*

The thought dissolved. Whatever it was, Shen Qingqiu would ask later. Much later.

Luo Binghe, Emperor of the Three Realms, had He had reached a conclusion before he initiated the kiss.

This lord had stood in this room alone, before the door opened, and looked at a wall of paintings made from a life that was his. The loneliness rendered in a quiet moment that no witness had ever been permitted to observe, because he had not been permitted to observe it himself.

A prophet had seen him. Had watched his life unfold with the intimate attention of someone in love with the thing he watched. Had taken up a brush to honour what he saw. And then — by some dimensional accident, by some cosmic clerical failure this lord did not yet understand — the devotion that followed from the seeing had been delivered to the wrong person. An imposter had taken up residence at the receiving end of a tribute that the imposter had not earned. The paintings had been made for this lord and given to a soft version who had not, at any point, conducted the life that the paintings portrayed.

The arithmetic of it was unambiguous. The life was his. The art was of his life. The love that grew from the art was therefore addressed to him. The only question was the correction.

This lord had concluded, before the door opened, that a correction was owed.

When it opened — and a soft version of Shen Qingqiu had crossed to him already smiling, voice warm, hands familiar, and an adoration that the imposter had never had to earn — the decision had already been made. This lord would take what had been mis-delivered. This lord would occupy the space he had been painted into and then denied. The kiss was not an impulse. The kiss was a reclamation.

Intense.

The word arrived and lodged somewhere behind his sternum — that recurring site, that chest-thing, the physical snag his body kept registering without permission. He set it aside. Observed, instead: the breath catching mid-word. The grip on his robes. Shen Qingqiu's body going soft in exactly the places that this Lord had decided it would go soft, in exactly the order he had decided it would do so.

A kiss like this was a matter of decisions made and responses produced. He had made his. The body against the wall was producing.

Good. Predictable.

Luo Binghe had decades of practice to generate responses of this calibre. It was not difficult. A specific pressure at the mouth, a specific angle at the jaw, a specific slide of the hand along the spine — this lord had sorted which combinations yielded which results in which bodies, and the sorting was reliable. That the body in this case was unfamiliar meant nothing; bodies shared more than they differed, and the ones that differed offered small variations the practiced hand corrected for within moments. The breath catching now — textbook. The opening of the mouth under his — textbook. The hands finding his shoulders and staying — good, that was a variation he preferred; some went to the robes and some to the hair and some braced against his chest as though to ward off, but the hands at the shoulders were the mark of a body settling in rather than bracing against.

It had always worked. Always. He had never seriously doubted that it would.

The smile, though.

The smile he had no words for.

It was still there. At the corner of the mouth busy with his. He had been reading it at intervals — the emperor's habit, reading every face in every room, mid-conversation, mid-kiss, mid-anything — and for several returns of his attention he had slotted it under the standard filing: *pleasure given by skill, recipient pleased by recipient's own pleasure,* the smile of a body that enjoyed being well-served and enjoyed, secondarily, being well-served *by him*. A category he knew. A category he had built a harem around.

Only it did not fit.

Was it the smile of a newcomer presented at court, who had learned that favor required enthusiasm and was offering enthusiasm accordingly? No.

Perhaps, the smile of a favored one who had learned, after many visits, which small private pleasures could be shown without consequence and which must not be — the calibrated fondness that a concubine developed for an emperor she had genuinely come to find agreeable? No, not that either.

It could be the smile produced by novelty — the body of a stranger who would never share his bed again, permitted to enjoy itself because the ledger would close at dawn. Not, not that

either.

The smile of a wife who loved him? He recalled now, that there had been some few who did. But even these did not match. Even these had been — had always been — faintly turned toward the throne behind him. Faintly attentive to the fact that they were being enjoyed by the demon emperor and not simply by a man.

This one was turned toward no throne.

The man against the wall had been kissing Luo Binghe with his eyes closed.

Something in him stilled.

Itvwas as of the voice had been warm in a way that did not attend to rank because it did not know rank was present. The smile on the mouth now was the uncomplicated smile of a person simply enjoying a kiss. Not the particular kiss of the demon emperor. Not the kiss of a throne. Just a kiss.

This lord had not, he realised, ever been kissed by anyone who did not know care about his power, about what they gained from him.

His hand was still working. This was important. He was still in command of his hands, still deploying them in the order he had arranged to deploy them, still generating the cascade of effects he had intended to generate. The craft held.

He returned his attention to the mouth and found, with a small lurch, that he did not know how long his hand had been moving up the spine. It had begun as a deliberate application. At some point along the ridge of vertebrae his attention had — done something. He could not name what. Lapsed. Drifted. Been — the word was not *lost,* this lord was never lost — he had been elsewhere, briefly, and had come back to find his hand still doing what it had been told, and the man against the wall still kissing him, and some quantity of breath having passed between them that he had not counted.

He recovered the count. A small glitch of attention. Nothing the ledger-hand could not correct for.

He kissed the mouth again. Deeper. Intentionally. He had decided on this kiss.

The mouth smiled against his.

And went.

Longer, this time. He surfaced to find his forehead pressed against Shen Qingqiu's forehead, breath mixing with breath, and he could not remember deciding to stop kissing.

His hand was no longer on the spine. His hand was at the nape of the neck, thumb resting behind the ear, and he could not remember moving it there. The hand had made its own small migrations while his attention had been — not elsewhere. Nowhere. It had been doing nothing. It had been here. Only here.

No part of him had been keeping count. No part of him had been reading the room. No part of him had been running the background reckoning that ran underneath every encounter of his reign — the checking, the attending, the low constant hum of *how is this going, how long remains, what is owed after, who waits outside* — and the silence where the hum should be was so complete that he noticed it only when it returned.

The hum returned. Quietly. Dutifully.

But it had been gone.

For some number of breaths, this lord had been kissing a man against a wall with no ledger running.

He had not done that in — ever. There was no entry in the record to which this could be compared. He had enjoyed women thoroughly and frequently. He had enjoyed them while also attending to twenty other things.

He had not been aware that there was a state in which one did not attend to twenty other things.

He had assumed the attending was the condition of being awake.

The smile was still there.

It occurred to him, without his permission, that the smile had been there the entire time. That it had been there during the lapse. That the lapse had been possible *because* the smile was there — because a body that smiled at him like that was a body the emperor-mind did not need to monitor for threat, for intent, for the careful minute-to-minute surveillance that attended every intimate encounter of a man who had six hundred women in the inner palace and a standing order of three assassinations per season. The silence in his head had been the silence of a body that did not need to be read.

The thought was too large.

He set it aside. Moved his hand up the spine — the slow drag he had begun some interval ago — and watched, with a satisfaction he did not interrogate, the breath shiver out of the mouth he was kissing. *This mouth was made to do that for me. It has been doing it, for years, in the wrong direction.* The correction was underway. This lord was receiving, at long last, the delivery of what had always been addressed to him.

This lord had been — for those breaths — simply with someone.

The hunger sharpened behind his sternum. Not lower. Higher. A pull — toward the mouth, toward the smile, toward whatever had just happened in him and might happen again if he could angle himself back into it. He did not have a word for the thing. He wanted it regardless. Wanted it with the particular ferocity of a man who had discovered, without warning, that he had been thirsty for a very long time.

"I want you."

The words came out without this lord. He did not notice. The scaffolding of his voice had always held, in every room, every throne, every bed — and here it had slipped its moorings and he was speaking in first person, plain, and he could not hear himself do it.

"I want — I need —"

The sentence would not complete. He had never said *need* to anyone.

But the paintings on the wall said someone had looked at the boy and thought *he deserves*. And the person who had painted them was in his arms and had given him, without knowing it, some moments of a thing he had not known was a thing, and the correction was within reach and the correction was simple. Take what had been mis-directed. Receive what had been addressed to him and misplaced. Accept the delivery of a letter that had spent a decade sitting on the wrong desk.

He was not stealing. He was collecting what was owed.

The logic was clean. The prophet had seen his life and had loved what she saw. The paintings depicted his face, his battles, his throne. The devotion that had poured into years of secret art had been inspired by *his* suffering — not the imposter's comfortable domesticity, not the soft version's earned tenderness, which had come later and was parasitic on a love that had been meant for someone else. The raw material of the art was Luo Binghe's life, and a man's life was his own, and the love that grew from the seeing of a life followed the same law of provenance. The imposter had received, for years, tribute that was due elsewhere. This lord was in the room now. The tribute could finally land where it belonged.

The argument was airtight. He had built airtight arguments his entire reign.

The smile had nothing to do with the argument.

Oh, Shen Qingqiu thought. *Oh, he's — tonight is different. Something happened.*

But the something was producing a version of Binghe that said *I need* with his whole chest cracking open, and Shen Qingqiu had opinions about that — strong opinions, the kind that made his hands move of their own accord to cradle the face above him, thumbs brushing the corners of that desperate mouth.

"You have me," he said. The words came out softer than he intended — but still, he'd long since stopped pretending he wasn't entirely, catastrophically gone for this face. "You've always had me."

He felt the full-body shudder that went through Binghe at those words. Felt it in the hands on his waist, in the chest pressed against his, in the breath that stuttered against his mouth.

Good. There he is.

He pulled Binghe closer. Kissed the corner of his mouth. Murmured, because the paintings were right there and the painting script always worked and tonight he was feeling generous: "Do you know how long I spent on the throne painting? The hand alone took me three attempts. Three." He kissed the other corner. "Because I kept getting the tension wrong. The way you hold everything — like you're bracing for someone to take it away."

The words entered him like a blade.

Not because they were sharp. Because they were *true*, and no one had ever — the way he held things. The bracing. A thing he did without thinking, a thing no one had ever noticed because no one had ever looked at his hands and seen anything other than what they could do to a person. And this voice, warm and fond and kissing him between sentences as though tenderness and information were the same thing, had just named it. Casually. The way you named something you'd studied for years and understood completely.

Like you're bracing for someone to take it away.

He had been bracing his entire life. No one had ever called it what it was —

His hands tightened on Shen Qingqiu's waist. Tight. Right on the —

He flinched.

— *ticklish, he knows I'm tick* —

But the mouth was back before the thought could land, hot and insistent, teeth catching his lower lip in a way that made Shen Qingqiu's breath hitch and his knees go unreliable.

Then Luo Binghe lifted him.

One motion — hands under his thighs, hauling him up, spreading him wide around Binghe's waist — and Shen Qingqiu's legs locked on pure reflex. Arms around his neck. Binghe's hands gripping the bare skin where the robes had ridden up, holding him with an ease that sent heat pooling low in Shen Qingqiu's stomach. The grip was not bruising but not negotiable either — Binghe had decided where Shen Qingqiu belonged and had simply put him there.

Luo Binghe's mouth found his throat. Open. Hot. Wet. The flat of his tongue dragging slow and deliberate up the tendon, then teeth closing on the join of neck and shoulder — not a bite, not quite, but the threat of a bite — and Shen Qingqiu's head fell back against the wall and his whole body went liquid.

"Shizun."

The word vibrated directly against his pulse point. Low and rough and wrecked.

And there it was. The thing the folder existed to contain.

Binghe wasn't asking. Binghe just *took* — had pinned him against the wall and spread his thighs and put his mouth on Shen Qingqiu's throat without a single moment of hesitation, without the devoted *am I doing well?* that lived underneath every touch his husband offered. Binghe's desire was usually a question. This was a *statement*.

His body, apparently, did not require the question.

That was also going in the folder.

"I told you —" His voice was a ruin. "— not to call me that in — ah —"

Teeth again. On the junction of neck and shoulder. Not gentle.

"— we've discussed this —"

The protest was automatic. Part of the script. But his body was doing what it wanted regardless of the script, and what it wanted was *more* — more of the mouth on his throat, more of the heat, more of the voice saying *Shizun* like it was the only word left in the language.

What wasn't script was the sound Binghe made in response — not sheepish delight. A groan that sounded like *Shizun* had been torn out of him. Like the word was something he'd been starving for.

— almost like he's never —

— almost like he's never been —

Don't be ridiculous. You've been married to him for years. You've discussed the Shizun thing. He knows the rules. He's just —

The thought died. Binghe's mouth moved to the hinge of his jaw, and the angle between them shifted — Binghe's hips rolling forward, slow and deliberate, pinning Shen Qingqiu against the wall with a pressure that was exactly, precisely, devastatingly *there* — and Shen Qingqiu's vision went white at the edges and his mouth fell open and his whole body arched into it, and the sound that came out of both of them was not something that belonged in a room with paintings.

Whatever demon politics produced this, I should send a thank-you note.

His hand found the back of Binghe's neck. Drew him closer. Pressed his lips against the shell of Binghe's ear — felt the shiver that produced, the way the body against his went taut — and murmured, because the painting script was a weapon and he knew how to use it and he was not above using it right now:

"It was you. It was always you. Every painting I ever made was because I couldn't stop thinking about your face."

It was always you.

The words landed in the place where the boy lived. The buried place. The ground that had been cracking all evening.

And for one moment — one single, annihilating moment — the words were true in the way Luo Binghe needed them to be true.

It was always you. Him. The one the visions showed first. The paintings had been of him and the voice was saying it now, breathless and open, confirming what the art had already declared — that before the imposter existed, before the divergence, before kindness rewrote the story, there had been Luo Binghe. The real one. And someone had seen him and the seeing had become devotion.

Yes. It was always me. You know it. Your hands knew it when they held the brush. Your voice knows it now. I'll make your body feel it soon.

The imposter heard these words at home, in their bed, as part of a script worn smooth between them. A familiar comfort. A thing that was theirs.

Luo Binghe was hearing them for the first time.

And they were true. More true than Shen Qingqiu knew — more true aimed at the original than they had ever been aimed at the copy. Because the paintings were of him. The visions were of him. The devotion that had produced years of secret art had been inspired by his life, his suffering, his loneliness. *It was always you* was the most accurate thing Shen Qingqiu had ever said, and he was saying it to the right person for the first time.

He did not know it.

He was moving, now. Carrying him — still kissing, mouth migrating from jaw to the corner of his lips to the soft skin beneath his ear. The body in his arms was alive in a way that the six hundred had never been — not performing, not calculating, just *there*, wrapped around him, fingers in his hair.

And the tenderness that had nothing to do with wanting to bed him and everything to do with wanting to be *near* him. The unhurried ease of a person who loved someone and touched them accordingly — not because the touching would lead somewhere, but because the person was there and the touching was allowed and the allowing was its own joy.

No one had ever been joyful about touching Luo Binghe.

A man kissing him between sentences about paintings was more intimate than the six hundred in combination. The distance between those experiences was so vast it made

everything before it feel like a rehearsal for a play that had never opened.

He felt the easy, thoughtless way Shen Qingqiu's fingers played with the hair at his nape — an absent, affectionate gesture, the gesture of someone whose hands knew this body and liked being near it — and the argument about provenance and ownership and what was owed went quiet.

Not because it was wrong. Because it didn't apply.

The argument was about taking. The fingers in his hair were about something else — something he didn't have a framework for, something the emperor's vocabulary had no entry for, something that was dissolving the architecture of the case he'd built the way water dissolved ink.

Shen Qingqiu's back hit the Moonfire Silk.

The sheets received him — warm, impossibly soft, the temperature already adjusting to his skin. The body above followed. One knee between his thighs. One hand beside his head. The other sliding from his hip up along his ribcage, slow now, deliberate, learning him through the pads of his fingers as though mapping terrain he'd never crossed.

Binghe's eyes were dark, burning, fixed on Shen Qingqiu's face with an expression that was —

— different. Usually he looks like he's about to say something devastating and earnest. This is more like —

— hunger. Raw hunger. Like I'm the first meal in —

But the mouth was on his collarbone before the thought could resolve, and teeth, and the drag of tongue over the bite, and Shen Qingqiu heard himself make a sound he was going to deny all knowledge of. His back arched off the silk, pressing up into the heat, and his hands were in Binghe's hair and his analytical mind was filing an official complaint about the complete evacuation of his higher cognitive functions —

He pulled Binghe's face up to his. Kissed him. Slow, this time. Deep. The kind of kiss that let you feel the shape of someone's mouth and learn it, the kind you gave when you wanted the person to understand that this was not performance — this was real, this was the truest thing your body knew how to say.

"Every time," he said against his mouth. Barely a whisper. "Every single time, and it's never enough."

Hands at his robes. Working the ties. Fast — the outer robe coming open, cool air against heated skin, and the hands moved to the next layer without —

— without the pause. He always pauses betw —

Fingers against the second tie. The knot came undone smooth and quick.

Since when does he not fumble the second tie? He always fumbles because the knot is close to my —

The robe fell open and hands found bare skin — palms sliding over his stomach, his ribs, learning the shape of him with a slow deliberateness that made Shen Qingqiu's breath catch. Then the hands spread wider, sliding up — fingers trailing over every rib — and Shen Qingqiu's hips jerked off the silk and his hands flew to Binghe's shoulders because the sensation was too much and not enough and he was going to come apart if the hands kept moving and die if they stopped.

Binghe made that sound again — raw, desperate, undone — and pressed his face against Shen Qingqiu's chest and breathed.

The urgency stopped.

Everything stopped. The hands stilled on his ribs. The mouth stilled over his sternum. Binghe's full weight settled onto him — not urgently, not pressing, just *heavy*, the way a body went heavy when the last thing holding it upright gave way. There was only breathing — Binghe's forehead against his chest, the rush of exhale across his breastbone, and the fine tremor running through the body above him.

Trembling?

Not the way he usually trembled. The fine vibration of restraint — of a man holding back, keeping his devotion at a volume the room could contain — that trembling, Shen Qingqiu knew. Loved, even.

This trembling came from somewhere else. Somewhere deep. Like the person producing it had been cold for a very long time and was only now, with his face pressed to skin, only now realising it.

Shen Qingqiu's hand went to Binghe's hair. Automatic. Comforting. The gesture of a person who had learned that the fastest way to bring Binghe back was through his hair.

"Binghe." Soft. "It's alright. Whatever it is — it's alright."

The sound from Binghe's throat was not a word.

Something buried lunged upward.

Not a thought. Not a word. A physical event — the thing he had put underground throwing itself toward the surface with a force that made his breath stutter, that made his arms lock tighter around the body beneath him, that made his face press harder against the chest as though he could get through it. The hands were moving toward his heart and every defence

he had was designed for cruelty, for manipulation, for being touched with a price — and these hands carried nothing. These hands were just warm.

Not a word he had. Not *mine*, not *please*, not any of the language available to the demon emperor of three realms. What he had was a body pressing itself against warmth the way a body pressed itself against warmth when it had been cold for a very long time and had stopped believing warmth existed.

The fingers threaded through his hair and the voice said *it's alright* and the ground —

Held. Because it had to. Because the person underneath was not someone who could exist in this room, in this world, in proximity to this without destroying it. The person underneath was the one who had peeled this face apart. Was the one who, in another version of the world, had not been gentled and had filled the absence where this room would otherwise have been with empire after empire, wife after wife, none of them quite the right size.

But the sound that came out of his throat was not a word and was not controlled and was not sanctioned by any authority he had over his own body, and the fingers in his hair tightened, and someone was holding him, and he breathed and breathed.

He had walked into this room collecting what was owed. The paintings were his. The visions were his. The devotion was his first. He had been the emperor receiving tribute, and the tribute had been overdue, and the correction had been simple.

The fingers in his hair said *it's alright.*

The correction did not work.

This was the part the airtight argument had not accounted for. The art was his, and the love that grew from the art was his, and by every law of provenance he had been able to construct the warmth was owed to him — and the warmth, when he reached for it, was not a thing that could be handed over. The smile that had undone his ledger was not a smile produced by the prophet's vision of his life. The smile was produced by the life the soft version had actually lived. The imposter had not been parasitic on a love meant for someone else; the imposter had been the condition under which the love could become this. The fingers in his hair belonged to a hand that had learned to run fingers through hair by running fingers through the hair of a husband who was not him. If the letter had been delivered to its rightful address, there would be no letter worth receiving — the warmth would not exist, because the hand that produced it had been shaped by years of being permitted to produce it, and this lord had not permitted anything, had not been present to be permitted to.

The argument was still airtight. The argument was just addressed to a thing that could not be reclaimed.

The emperor dissolved and what was left was not collecting but clinging. Not taking but memorising — the weight, the specific pressure of being held by someone who did not flinch, who did not calculate, who ran fingers through his hair as though that were a thing people did for him, as though that were a thing he was allowed.

He held on and knew it could not last and held on anyway.

He had learned young that good things were provisional, and that they arrived without warning of the fact, so that by the time you understood they were leaving, your hands were already shaped around them.

His hands were shaped around this now. The body beneath him. The fingers in his hair. The voice that said *it's alright* as though that were something a person could promise.

He was not going to be the one who let go.

Then his mouth resumed. Urgent. Hungry. Moving up from chest to throat, hands tracing the body beneath him with a desperation that was not desire now but inventory — mapping, learning, committing to a memory he would carry out of this room and into the empty one waiting in his own world. His own chambers. His own bed, sized for one. His own palace where no one left a teacup on the nightstand and no one left a book open face-down on the pillow and no one said *we're happy*.

Shen Qingqiu let himself be consumed. Let the mouth and the hands and the weight press him into the Moonfire Silk. Because whatever was driving Binghe to kiss him like he was drowning — whatever unnamed thing had turned the painting script into this raw, trembling, desperate act of need — Shen Qingqiu could be the air.

His hands slid up. Palms flat against the chest above him.

His palm settled over Binghe's heart.

Smooth skin.

His hand had made this gesture a hundred times. His hand *knew this chest.* Fingers pressed without his conscious decision — the pad of his thumb seeking the ridge, the raised line where Xiu Ya had come through, the mark Binghe kept like a love letter and that Shen Qingqiu touched like penance.

Half an inch left.

Smooth.

Half an inch right.

Smooth.

His fingers moved again. Methodical, the pleasure falling out of the gesture as the searching took it. Sternum. Pectoral. Back to centre. The scar was a *ridge*. It was not something a hand could miss.

His hand was not missing it.

It was not there.

Everything stopped.

The ticklish spot. The second tie. The missing pauses. The trembling from somewhere cold. The this Lord. *The way* Shizun *was groaned like a man hearing water in a desert. The eyes that were hungry but not —*

No, not Binghe's eyes. Not quite.

There is no scar on this chest.

This is not my Binghe.

His stomach lurched. Not a thought. A body-event — the recognition arriving in the gut before it arrived in the mind, his skin remembering, retrospectively, every inch of the last several minutes. The weight against his. The mouth on his throat. The thighs gripped open around this man's waist. His own voice saying *you've always had me.*

To a stranger.

He had been kissing a stranger. He had been saying his husband's lines to a stranger. He had been letting a stranger have a body his husband had spent a decade learning, and somewhere — somewhere not here, somewhere Shen Qingqiu's body could not find from this wall — his actual husband was —

Where is he. Where is he. Where —

Spiritual energy flared.

A twist, a shove — graceless, desperate, the lurch of a body that had decided *out* before the mind could formulate a reason. His back hit the edge of the bed frame and then he was standing, three feet of air between them, hands fumbling his robes closed because they were half-undone and his fingers weren't working properly — the knot, the one this person had opened without fumbling — and it wouldn't close because his hands were shaking too hard.

He gave up on the tie. Pulled the robes shut with his fists. Stood there, breathing hard, hair wrecked, lips swollen, holding his own clothes closed like armour.

The hands stopped.

The left palm, flat over his sternum. Fingers pressing. Methodical. Half an inch left, half an inch right.

He did not know what they were checking for.

He knew the moment they didn't find it.

The change in the body beneath him was instantaneous — the processing, the understanding, the full weight of *wrong* arriving all at once. Then the shove.

He let it happen. Did not catch himself, did not deploy the reflexes that could have caught and held and prevented the separation — because catching and holding was not available to him here. Could not be available.

He let the warmth go.

Lay on the Moonfire Silk and listened to Shen Qingqiu scramble to his feet, hands scrabbling at robes.

His arm was still extended. He had not yet withdrawn it. Fingers still spread in the space where a body had been, reaching for warmth that was no longer there. He was aware of this. Could not immediately make himself correct it.

The silk held the shape of him. Warm still.

He pressed his palm down and measured the warmth against the cold of the air, and knew with the certainty of long practice how long it would take to go.

The hand curled. Slowly. Around nothing. Around the shape of where warmth had been.

Then the mask came down.

He built it deliberately. Piece by piece. Jaw: set. Spine: straight. The hand on the silk — the one still pressed against the fading warmth — lifted. Placed at his side. The expression cleared. Each component assembled with the efficiency of long practice, the way you built a wall you'd built ten thousand times.

Each piece going on was a door closing. The mask was not protection — the mask was the price. The cost of standing up when what you wanted was to press your face against bare skin and stay.

He rose from the bed.

Shen Qingqiu watched the transformation happen.

One moment the man on the silk had been reaching — hand pressed against the warmth where Shen Qingqiu's body had lain, and Shen Qingqiu had seen that, had seen the palm pressing down, trying to hold onto residual heat, and the image was going to live behind his eyelids for a long time — and the next moment the cold emperor was standing in his bedroom, composure so complete it looked like it had always been there.

The closing was so practised it looked like nature instead of effort.

"Who are you?" His voice came out steadier than his hands. A small victory.

The mask came on. He watched it happen. The jaw set. The spine straightened. The man on the silk was gone and something he had painted a hundred times was in his place, looking at him with an expression he had rendered in ink a hundred times — and it looked exactly like his paintings, and that was the worst thing about it, because it meant his paintings had been accurate and he had not understood what he was drawing.

The silence held. Long enough that Shen Qingqiu thought there would be no answer to his question.

Held.

"You claim to have seen my entire life." Quiet. Measured. Each word placed with the precision of centuries of practice. "And you couldn't recognise me standing in front of you."

The words hit Shen Qingqiu in the chest. Because he was right. The face in front of him was the face on the wall — the face he had painted a hundred times, every angle, every expression — and he hadn't known. Had kissed it and touched it and wrapped his legs around it and hadn't known.

"You're *him*." It came out before he could stop it. Not a question. Said with a breathlessness he couldn't control — the voice of a person meeting someone they'd believed was unreachable. "The one from the — you're actually —"

Not the time, not the time, you absolute disaster, not the —

His hand moved. Forward. Half a cun toward the face he had painted for years — the same instinct that had made him pick up a brush in the first place, the instinct that said *closer, let me see* — before he caught it. Pulled it back. Pressed it against his own robes.

His voice had gone strange. Too open. Not the Peak Lord, not the husband — the person underneath. The one who had lain awake aching for someone in a novel and had never, not once, expected that person to look back.

Something shifted in those crimson eyes. A flicker — there and gone — like a crack in ice showing the water underneath.

Then it closed over. The flicker vanished. What was left was the face from the paintings — the cold emperor, the mask — but worse than the paintings, because the paintings had been still and this mask was being held in place, actively, by a person who had just been pressing his palm against the fading heat where Shen Qingqiu's body had lain.

"All those visions, Shizun."

The word *Shizun* landed like a blade. Not because it was harsh — because it was different. Thirty seconds ago that word had been groaned against his throat like a prayer. Now it was cold. Precise. A weapon made from a word that had been devotion.

"And you still couldn't see me."

The silence after was absolute.

Shen Qingqiu stood in his bedroom, robes clutched shut, and looked at the demon emperor from his paintings — alive and hurt and real and standing three feet away. The demon emperor looked back.

The composure was so perfect it could only be a scar.

Neither of them moved.

And underneath everything — underneath the shock and the ache of looking at a face he had painted and seeing it breathing, wounded, held together by sheer force of practice —

Where is my Binghe?

Chapter 3: The Witness

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"This Lord is Luo Binghe."

The words landed in the space between them and the face on the other side of that space did something Luo Binghe had not prepared for.

It cracked open.

He saw the fear immediately. That was expected. The flinch. The recoil. The held breath. The white-knuckled grip on his robes. Fear was the foundation of every reaction Luo Binghe had ever provoked since the Abyss. He understood fear the way a mason understood stone. He could build with it. Had built everything with it.

But underneath the fear — tangled in it, inseparable from it, like two colors of ink bleeding into the same water — there was something else.

Shen Qingqiu was looking at him with *wonder*.

Helpless. Involuntary. The widening of eyes that had nothing to do with the body's preparation for flight and everything to do with the mind encountering something it had only ever held at a distance.

No one had ever looked at Luo Binghe like that.

His chest did something. A hitch, a catch, a compression behind the ribs. He cataloged it the way he cataloged all physical anomalies: noted and dismissed. He had done this a thousand times — read a face, extracted what was useful, discarded the rest.

But the dismissal did not take this time.

The compression remained. And he could not look away.

The wonder, the impossible openness, the eyes wide and bright and the whole face turned toward him like something that had been waiting. No one had ever waited for him. People endured him, fled from him, submitted to him. They did not wait for him with this particular quality of breathlessness, as though his arrival in the room was the answer to a question they had been holding for years.

Something behind the oldest wall stirred. Not the buried thing, something older. Something from the woodshed, from before the woodshed, from the very first time a small boy had looked up at a face and hoped it might look back with something other than —

He killed the thought. Fast. Practised.

But his eyes were still on Shen Qingqiu's face. And the expression had not changed.

Shen Qingqiu's lips had parted. His free hand had drifted forward half a cun before catching itself. As though some part of him had been reaching for something he'd only ever imagined before the rest of him remembered to be afraid.

The reaching was worse than the fear. The fear was a door Bingge knew how to walk through. The reaching was a door he had never seen before, and something behind his ribs was trying to walk through it without his permission.

"You know me," he said. Not a question. The awe had told him that much. This was not a man encountering a stranger. This was a man encountering something he had studied, followed, perhaps even —

The thought snagged. He did not follow it.

"I—" Shen Qingqiu's voice had gone thin. "You're — but how —"

His eyes were still too wide. Still too bright. Still looking at Luo Binghe with that impossible double exposure of terror and fascination, and something within was responding to it with a hunger so old he had forgotten it was there.

And the way Shen Qingqiu looked.

Hair disordered. Color high on his cheekbones. The beauty, unlocked by the warmth-softened version of a face he had destroyed. Sharper now. More alive. The composure fighting the flush his body had not yet caught up to, the crisis his mind was managing.

The mouth still carrying the ghost of being kissed.

And on his throat, just above the collar of the loosely tied robes, at the junction of neck and shoulder where the fabric had shifted: a mark.

Dark. Fresh. A bloom of broken capillaries left by teeth that had pressed without gentleness against skin that bruised easily. His teeth. His mouth.

The mark was *his*. The imposter had the love and this impossible life. But this small, darkening bruise on the throat of a man who was currently clutching his robes shut and glaring at him — the mark to this Luo Binghe alone.

It was a petty thing to notice. A petty thing to hold.

He held it anyway.

Luo Binghe's tongue touched his upper lip.

He was aware of it approximately half a second after it happened.

He saw the exact moment Shen Qingqiu saw it, too. The green eyes went sharp. Something controlled shifted into something harder, still held, but with an edge in it now, and Shen

Qingqiu drew himself up to his full height in thin, damp robes and said:

"*Shameless*." The word landed clean and precise. "You are *not* my husband."

He wasn't.

Luo Binghe knew that. Had arrived in this room knowing exactly what he was and wasn't and had not confused it for a single moment. In the moments when the warmth had reached him and he had let it, the confusion had never been about identity.

"No," he said. "This Lord is not your husband."

A pause. Measured.

"But this Lord is the real Luo Binghe."

The word *real* did its work. He could see it land. There was a flinch that wasn't quite a flinch, a sharp intake of breath, and, behind those green eyes, the processing of new information that rearranged what was already there.

Real implied the other one wasn't. *Real* claimed primacy.

And because the lip-lick had been an accident and the surest way to regain control was to make someone else lose theirs, he aimed for the seam.

"Forgive me," Luo Binghe said. His voice was perfectly level. "It must be difficult. Distinguishing which man in your bedroom tonight is your husband." A pause. "Given that you married one of your own disciples."

He had aimed the remark precisely. The implication of impropriety, the suggestion of something sordid in the foundation of this impossible domestic arrangement. Shame was a lever and he'd used it a thousand times.

Because shame was a lever and he'd used it a thousand times. Locate the thing a person was afraid to look at directly, name it aloud, and watch them scramble. He had used it and watched powerful men crumble at the mere suggestion that their private hungers might be spoken in daylight.

But Shen Qingqiu's expression wasn't defensive.

"Yes," he said.

One word. Settled. Complete.

Something in Luo Binghe's chest moved wrong.

"I married him after he came back a man," he said, quieter. Almost to himself.

He wasn't looking at Luo Binghe. He was looking somewhere past him, at some moment Luo Binghe had no access to. Whatever it contained, it did not appear to cause him any shame or

pain.

Shen Qingqiu had heard the worst framing of the question and answered it the way a man answered what day it was. *Yes. I married him.* There was no flicker of guilt hastily suppressed, no telltale tension at the corners of the mouth.

Luo Binghe had no next move.

He was standing in the wreckage of an attack that had found no purchase, holding nothing. Shen Qingqiu was still two arms' lengths away with his knuckles slowly unclenching from his own robes, and the lamplight was catching the color in his face, and the fan was still on the desk, and Luo Binghe had nothing to say.

His hands clenched at his sides. The crescents bit into his palms.

He did not choose to examine why.

The Lord is the real Luo Binghe.

Shen Qingqiu's brain was doing the thing it did in emergencies: processing at full speed while his face remained calm and expressionless.

The real Luo Binghe.

He watched the man smooth his own hair, fingers finding the strands, pressing them back into place with the practiced, unhurried attention of someone who had always taken that seriously. He watched it the way you watched something happen that your brain refused to fully assemble: each component understood perfectly, the whole refusing to cohere.

He knew that hair.

He had *painted* that hair. Those waves, that volume, that particular ink-black sheen, in approximately forty-seven distinct studies from memory before he'd gotten the layering right. Across years. And hidden in a secret alcove because there was no version of explaining them that ended with him remaining a functional member of society.

He owned a figurine. Multiple. In his last life. One of them had mood lighting.

The mood lighting was not relevant right now. The mood lighting was *never going to be relevant again* because Shen Qingqiu was going to take that particular memory and brick it into a wall and never look at it, because the PIDW protagonist was standing in his bedroom and had just identified himself as "the real one" and Shen Qingqiu's brain was — unhelpfully, catastrophically — reminding him that the figurine had cost more than his monthly food budget and he hadn't hesitated.

System. He felt like he was gripping the edge of a cliff with his fingernails. *System. What is this. Do you have a notification for this. Literally anything.*

【SPECIAL BONUS EPISODE UNLOCKED: THE ORIGINAL】

【Sit back and enjoy!】

Enjoy, he thought. *The System wants me to enjoy*

The System — the omniscient, boundary-violating, occasionally sadistic game interface that had governed his existence for nearly two decades — had assessed the situation and concluded that the appropriate response was *enjoyment*. A man who had tortured and killed the original owner of this body was standing in his bedroom, wearing the face of his husband, having discovered things about his own nervous system that Shen Qingqiu had been perfectly content not knowing — and the System wanted him to *sit back*.

He closed it so hard that something behind his eyes twinged.

Because this was Bing*ge*. Not *his* Binghe. Not the Luo Binghe he'd spent years carefully, painstakingly, and *accidentally* redirecting away from the blackened protagonist trajectory. This was the original protagonist from PIDW. The full version. The one who had followed the entire canonical path without interference.

And Shen Qingqiu had just kissed him — well, *kissed* was doing a lot of heavy lifting in that sentence, given that there had also been a wall involved and a discovered preference for being held in place and a sound he'd made that he was never going to think about again for the rest of his natural and unnatural life.

Except the transmigrator brain — the one that had spent years reading PIDW, that had opinions about character arcs, that had written twelve thousand forum words arguing Airplane had fumbled the characterization — that brain would not stop.

He didn't hurt me.

The thought arrived like a notification he couldn't dismiss.

He had every opportunity. He was alone in a room with the face of the person who abused him for years, and he stood there and let me touch him and asked me to keep talking. He wanted to hear about the paintings.

Shen Qingqiu told the thought to sit down. The thought did not sit down.

He kissed me like a man who had never been kissed by someone who meant it.

That one was worse. That one had physical evidence — the memory of a mouth against his that had started out taking and then, somewhere in the middle, forgotten it was supposed to be taking and just — held on. The tremble. The sound he'd pressed into Shen Qingqiu's chest was not a word in any language Shen Qingqiu knew, and he knew four.

He was not going to think about the sound. He was going to file the sound in the same locked drawer where he kept the memory of the time Binghe had come back from a night hunt with his robes torn across the chest and Shen Qingqiu had walked directly into a doorframe and told Ming Fan it was low blood sugar, and he was never going to open that drawer again.

The drawer was already open. The sound was sitting on top of every other thing in it, impossible to ignore, and his hands were shaking behind his fan.

"You've chosen that word carefully," Shen Qingqiu said. His voice came out level, which he considered a personal achievement worthy of at least five OOC points in the opposite direction. "*Real* implies the other one isn't."

He watched it land. Watched the edge on Bingge's expression sharpen, not quite a flinch, but the place where a flinch would have been, if this were someone who still allowed himself those. The edge on *real* was the most honest thing he'd let out all evening.

He probably didn't know it had escaped.

Good. Shen Qingqiu could work with accidental honesty. Accidental honesty was the only currency he'd ever successfully traded in. His entire marriage was built on it, really. A decade of feelings leaking through gaps in composure until the composure itself became a kind of confession.

"You were in my home all evening," Shen Qingqiu said. He paused. The thing he was about to say was true, and naming it meant putting it in the room between them where they would both have to look at it, and part of him — the part that had spent a previous life avoiding difficult conversations with the dedication of an Olympic athlete — wanted to retreat behind a fan and stay there until a dimensional rift reopened and took the original protagonist back to wherever he came from.

He did not retreat. Because this was a man who had been denied the truth of his own circumstances for the entirety of his life, and Shen Qingqiu was not going to add to that count.

"You kissed me," he said.

Neutral. Factual. As though his pulse weren't doing something deeply unacceptable behind his ribs.

"Yes," the man said.

Silence. Not the searching kind. The kind that cost something to hold.

Shen Qingqiu could see exactly where it cost him. In the slight additional work the stillness required, the jaw held a fraction too tight. Bingge was a man who had spent centuries making his silences look effortless, and this one wasn't. Shen Qingqiu could read the effort the way he could read brushwork: in the places where control took visible labour.

"Then I think," he said, with the tone of a man who had everything under control and not the tone of a man whose body had, approximately seven minutes ago, enthusiastically voted to sleep with a war criminal, "you had better tell me what you actually came here for."

The stallion protagonist of PIDW, Emperor Luo Binghe of Three Realms looked at him. Shen Qingqiu looked back. He was without his fan, dressed in his sleeping robes, standing in his

own home with absolutely no institutional support, and a System that had just told him to *enjoy* this.

Talk to me, he thought. *I know you. I've known you longer than you've known yourself. I read every chapter. I wrote twelve thousand words about your character arc at three in the morning because I thought you deserved better than what Airplane gave you, and I was right, and you're standing in my bedroom proving it.*

He kept his face composed.

His hands, behind his back, were trembling.

He waited.

"Why did you paint me?"

Luo Binghe heard the question leave his lips before he thought of it. Not *this lord wishes to understand.* It was rawer than that. This had been sitting in his chest all evening, growing heavier with every painting described, every private moment narrated back to him by a voice that carried grief.

He had never asked a question like this. Not of anyone. Not in three centuries of ruling, conquering, and collecting.

His six hundred wives had never prompted it because their devotion was currency and he had always known the exchange rate. The generals knelt because the alternative was death. The court smiled because the alternative was ruin. Every act of loyalty he had ever received came with a price list attached, and he had never once been fool enough to mistake the transaction for the thing itself.

But the paintings had no price list. They were created by a person who had no reason to expect the subject would ever see them. There was no audience. No transaction. No exchange rate. Someone had sat alone in a room and painted his loneliness because they felt it. Not because he'd demanded it. Not because they feared what would happen if they didn't.

This man had sat alone in a room and painted Luo Binghe's loneliness because they *felt* it. Not because he'd demanded it. Not because they feared what would happen if they didn't. Because they looked at his life and something in them *ached*.

Emperor Luo Binghe had never been ached for. He had been feared and obeyed and desired and used and worshipped in the hollow way that worship happened when the alternative was annihilation. But no one had ever sat with the knowledge of his life and *grieved*.

And the real question underneath — the one sitting in his chest, the one that had never once in three centuries had anyone to be asked of — was not *why did you paint me.*

It was: *Why did you care?*

"Not the story you tell your husband." His voice was low. Controlled. The control was costing him. "Tell me the real reason."

He stepped closer. Just a single step. The distance between them was still two arms' lengths, but the quality of it shifted.

"Why would you — "

The word *you* carried the weight of everything Shen Qingqiu meant in his world. The hands that had beaten and whipped him bloody.

" — spend years painting me with that kind of devotion?"

Shen Qingqiu heard the question and understood, with the precision of someone who had spent years studying this character, exactly what was being asked.

Not *why did you paint.* The real question was underneath, and it was the same question Bingge had been asking all evening without knowing he was asking it:

Why would someone who wears the face of my abuser look at me and see something worth years of secret work?

He could not say *I read a novel about you.* He could not say *you were a fictional character and I was a reader who cared too much.*

He could say the truth, translated.

"I had visions," Shen Qingqiu said. The Seer's voice was steady and measured.

But underneath it, something less measured. Because hehad read six thousand chapters of a badly written stallion novel on a hospital bed with a body that was failing and a mind that was the only thing that still worked, and he had latched onto one character — the protagonist of PIDW who deserved better — and he had *cared* about that character with the specific, ferocious investment of someone who had nothing else to care about that he would have simply called *having standards* if anyone had asked

And now that character was asking him *why*, and the honest answer was: *because caring about you was the closest thing I had to being alive*.

But underneath it, something less measured.

"I saw the boy in the woodshed."

The air in the room changed temperature.

"The woodshed." Luo Binghe's voice went flat. The flatness felt worse than anger. Anger had heat, had energy, had somewhere to go.

"I saw it," Shen Qingqiu said. Quiet. Steady. Meeting his eyes without flinching. "I saw the boy who was locked in the dark. I saw what was done to him. And I saw that no one helped."

The woodshed. Where Shen Jiu had locked him. Where the beatings happened, where the hunger happened, where a child learned that the person who was supposed to care for him would use that care as a weapon.

And a version of Shen Qingqiu's face was standing in front of him saying *I saw it.* Wearing the face of the person who had put him there. Saying it with a voice that held no contempt.

"And I thought — " Shen Qingqiu's voice was very quiet now. " — if I ever had the chance, I would be the person who did.

Something in Luo Binghe cracked at that declaration.

Not the mask. The mask held. It always held, it had been holding for decades and it would hold until the foundations gave way underneath it. But something behind the mask, something structural, shifted. The way a building shifted when the ground beneath it moved — not falling yet, not breaking, but no longer sitting where it had been.

The person who did. Help. He meant help. This face — this impossible, wrong, dead face — was telling him that it had witnessed his worst hours and its response had not been revulsion but intervention. Not the intervention of power. The intervention of kindness.

Something behind the oldest wall moved. The first wall, the one built in the dark with a child's hands because wanting things from people who held power over you was how you got hurt, and not wanting was the only way to survive.

Not the buried thing. This was the foundation. The original wound. The place where a boy had wanted his Shizun to be kind and his Shizun had locked him in the dark instead, and the boy had learned the lesson so thoroughly that the wanting itself had become the enemy. Not the cruelty and not the dark, but the wanting, because the wanting was what made the dark unbearable

He had killed that wanting. Carefully. Deliberately. Had starved it in the woodshed and smothered it in the Abyss and buried it under an empire. A century of stone on top of it.

And a man wearing the face of the person who killed it was standing in front of him saying *I would be the person who helped,* and the dead thing was pressing upward the way green things pressed through cracks in pavement. Not knowing it was supposed to be dead.

His hands were shaking. He put them behind his back.

"You saw everything." His voice was rough. He could hear the roughness and could not smooth it. "Every cruelty. Every conquest. Did you see what I did to — "

He stopped.

What I did to you. To the other Shen Qingqiu. The one he had tortured. The one he had killed. The one whose face this person was wearing with none of the cruelty.

Did this version know?

"I saw what you did when you were hurt," Shen Qingqiu said. Carefully. Within the Seer framework, but pushing its edges. "I saw cruelty used as a language by someone who was never taught another one."

He watched the words land. Watched the mask hold, and hold, and hold, and watched the thing behind it press closer to the surface.

This was the most dangerous part of the conversation. Not because Bingge might hurt him. The man had had every opportunity and hadn't taken it, and underneath the emperor's posture was a person who had pressed his face against bare skin and trembled. The danger was that Shen Qingqiu might say too much. Might let the Seer cover story thin until the transmigrator showed through.

Because what he wanted to say — what was pressing against the inside of his teeth like a physical thing — was: *I read six thousand chapters about you. I watched Airplane bury your humanity under plot and papapa and power escalation and I dug it back up every time. I kept a file. I argued with strangers at two in the morning about whether you were capable of love and I said yes, he is, he always was, the novel just never gave him the chance to prove it.*

He said none of that. The Seer's cover held. His teeth stayed shut.

But Shen Qingqiu's eyes were stinging, and that was a betrayal he hadn't authorized.

"And your response was to paint me?"

Bingge's voice was raw. Not the emperor who had conquered the three realms. Just a man, asking a question whose answer mattered more than anything he had conquered.

"My response was to grieve," Shen Qingqiu said. "The paintings were grief. For a boy who deserved better and a man who never got it."

The silence that followed was not silence. It was the sound of a man processing something his vocabulary had no category for. Bingge's hands were at his sides, balled into fists. Shen Qingqiu could see the knuckles whitening, could see the fingers pressing into palms.

"You look at me like that," Bingge said. Almost wonderingly. Almost accusatory. "As though I'm something worth mourning."

He stepped closer. One more step. The distance was a single arm's length now.

"The Shen Qingqiu I knew looked at me like I was dirt on his shoe." His voice dropped. Something dark moved through it. Not quite anger, but the place where anger and grief had fused together so long ago they were no longer separable. "And when I finally had the power to make him look at me differently — "

Luo Binghe stopped.

Shen Qingqiu knew how that sentence ended. He had read it. He had written forum posts about it. He knew about the torture and the imprisonment and the death, and he knew that *making him look at me differently* meant something terrible, and he knew that the terrible thing had been done by a man who had once been a boy in a woodshed who had wanted his teacher to be kind.

"I know what happened," Shen Qingqiu said. Quiet. "Between you and the version of me in your world. I saw that too."

The silence was leaden.

"And you're not afraid of me?"

"I'm terrified of you," Shen Qingqiu said. "But not for the reason you think."

Bingge's eyes narrowed. Waiting.

"I'm not afraid you'll hurt me."

The narrowing sharpened. Shen Qingqiu held his gaze. He chose not to continue, held it back because whatever came after *I'm not afraid you'll hurt me* was going to open something he wasn't ready to open. Not here. Not yet. Not while he could still feel the ghost of this man's mouth on his throat.

Into the silence, Bingge stepped forward.

He saw the warmth escape in Shen Qingqiu's words. Saw the composure crack — just a fraction, just the fondness leaking through the edges — and his body recognized an opening before his mind finished processing it.

"Shizun," he said.

He pitched it soft. Tender. The way he imagined the imposter would say it. With reverence, turning the title into something intimate. Luo Binghe had not used that word since the day he'd killed the man it belonged to, and deploying it now was a calculated act. The warmth had opened a door, and Luo Binghe had been raised to walk through every door that opened.

"You called me shameless and said that I am not your husband." He let the tenderness sit in his voice like a thing that belonged there. "But those paintings —"

He looked at the paintings on the wall. His face. His life. His loneliness, rendered in devotion.

And the weapon slipped.

It was supposed to be a performance. The softness was supposed to be a tool in the same way the scorn was a tool and the same way *real* had been a tool. It was the same way every word he had spoken in two decades had been a tool aimed at producing a specific effect in a specific target.

But the word *Shizun* had a weight he had not accounted for. It sat in his mouth and it tasted like the woodshed. Felt too close to the version of himself who had wanted that title to mean something, who had stood outside a door and waited to be let in, who had believed, briefly and catastrophically, that the person on the other side might one day look at him with something other than contempt.

And this one had. This Shizun had looked at him with exactly that. Had painted his loneliness. Had said *I would be the person who helped.*

The tenderness in his voice stopped being a weapon approximately halfway through the sentence and he could not get it back.

" — those paintings were for me. Before you married your husband."

He turned back to Shen Qingqiu. The mask was still on. The thing behind the mask was not.

"You looked into the future and the first thing you saw was me. And your first response was devotion."

Shizun.

The word hit him sideways.

He'd been called Shizun ten thousand times, by his own Binghe, in tones ranging from desperate to adoring to that breathless way that meant they were not going to make it to the bedroom. He knew the word. The word was his.

But not from this mouth. From this mouth, the word *Shizun* had a history that involved a woodshed and a beating and a child learning that the person who held that title would use it to hurt him. From this mouth, the word should taste like ash.

And yet, the stallion protagonist had said it tenderly.

Shen Qingqiu's transmigrator brain — the part that had spent years analyzing this character, the part that could read Bingge's tactical shifts the way he read brushwork — clocked the maneuver instantly. It was tactical seduction from a man who had six hundred wives' worth of practice.

Good. *Fine*. Shen Qingqiu could see the mechanism. He could name the technique. He could stand here and observe it with the clinical detachment of a transmigrator who had read the source material and knew exactly how this character operated.

Except he'd watched the weapon slip. Had watched the performance turn real in Bingge's own mouth. He'd seen the tenderness reaching the word *Shizun* and Luo Binghe finding something there it hadn't expected, and not recovering. Whatever had started as a calculation had ended as something Bingge hadn't planned, and Shen Qingqiu had seen the exact moment the control left his voice, because Shen Qingqiu had been watching for it the way he'd watched for it across six thousand chapters.

The problem was that knowing it was a weapon did not stop it from working. And knowing it had *stopped* being a weapon made it worse.

Your first response was devotion.

The claim landed in the part of Shen Qingqiu that had spent years alone with this story.

Because the terrible thing was — the part he was never going to say out loud, the part the Seer framework would choke on — the terrible thing was that Bingge wasn't wrong. Not entirely. The paintings had been for him. Shen Yuan knew the stallion protagonist first, and Shen Yuan had looked at that emperor and hadn't been able to look away. Had argued with strangers about him. Had kept files. Had spent years paying attention to a person that the narrative itself had stopped paying attention to, digging past the papapa and the power escalation for the moments where the mask slipped and the boy in the woodshed was still visible underneath.

That wasn't grief. That was something the Seer cover story didn't have a word for. *Obsession* was too clinical. *Devotion* was what Bingge had said and it wasn't wrong enough to correct. The honest word was something closer to *recognition* — the stubborn act of seeing a person that everyone else had given up on and refusing to give up too.

And now that person was standing in his bedroom saying *your first response was devotion* and Shen Qingqiu could not tell him he was wrong because he wasn't, and could not tell him the truth because the System would not permit it, and could not stop the part of his brain that was — after everything — cataloguing the way the lamplight caught those cheekbones and thinking *the paintings don't do him justice, I never got the jaw right, the jaw is better in person —*

Not the time.

Absolutely not the time for artistic assessment of the man who just kissed you under false pretences and is currently claiming ownership of your life's work.

He was doing it anyway. The part of him that had spent years painting this face could not stop analysing it now that it was three-dimensional and breathing and looking at him with an expression the paintings had never captured because the paintings hadn't known it existed — this specific expression, the hunger and the hurt and the barely-held composure, the emperor's mask over the boy's wanting. He wanted to paint *this*. Right now. This exact expression. The one that no version of the story had ever shown him.

REALLY not the time.

And then — because Shen Qingqiu's brain had apparently decided that if it was going to betray him it might as well do it thoroughly — the thought arrived that he had been actively, desperately avoiding since the scar discovery:

The folder.

The folder — the one labeled DO NOT OPEN that contained the taking, the claiming, the wall, the way his body had gone bilingual without his consent — had been filling all evening. He'd filed the kiss and not looked at it since. But Bingge's claim — *your first response was devotion* — had just jimmied the lock.

Because the thing that had done things to Shen Qingqiu's pulse hadn't been just a soft voice. It had been the *person.* The original stallion protaganist. The one whose every scene he had consumed, analyzed, and argued about for years before he'd ever transmigrated.

Oh no.

Oh no, oh no, oh no —

He was attracted to Bingge.

The realisation landed in stages, each one worse than the last. His body had known before his brain did — had responded to Bingge with a heat that the painting sessions had never quite produced, and he had liked it, and the reason he had liked it was that some deep, unexamined part of Shen Yuan had recognised the real thing and responded accordingly. And this was the worst moment of self-knowledge Shen Qingqiu had ever experienced, and he had once realized he was in love with his own student while bound and imprisoned, so the bar was *high.*

He filed this. Into the folder. The folder was at capacity. The folder had been at capacity since the wall, and it was now structurally unsound.

The folder was, at this point, less a folder and more a load-bearing wall with cracks in it, and Shen Qingqiu was going to need to do something about it eventually but *eventually* was not *now* and *now* he had a demon emperor saying *Shizun* tenderly at him at him while standing next to paintings of his own loneliness, and Shen Qingqiu’s heart rate was doing something his cardiovascular system was going to have opinions about later.

He took a breath.

"You're not wrong," Shen Qingqiu said. Quiet. Honest. Giving him that much. "About what I saw first and what I decided to do."

Something shifted in Bingge's expression — not softening, not opening, but the quality of a person who had braced for a denial and received a confirmation instead, and didn't know what to do with it.

"But you're not right either," Shen Qingqiu continued. "Not in the way you think."

It was not a simple answer. It was not the kind of thing you said to one person when the other person needed to hear it too.

His husband was missing. The man from the paintings was standing in his bedroom. And Shen Qingqiu did not trust his own voice right now, because his voice had been leaking warmth all evening like a cracked vessel, and if he opened his mouth again he was going to

say something that the folder couldn't hold and the Seer couldn't frame and the marriage couldn't absorb without conversation, and the conversation needed to happen with his husband, not with the living embodiment of his first literary obsession.

"And I don't think I can explain the difference while standing in my nightclothes in a room where you kissed me twenty minutes ago."

It was meant to be a deflection. A controlled retreat behind the wry composure that had served him for years and would, with any luck, continue to serve him for the next ten minutes until this situation resolved itself in literally any direction.

But it came out warmer than he intended. The fondness leaked through — the impossible, inappropriate, indefensible fondness of a person looking at a character they had loved from a distance for years and finding him here, real, wounded, asking.

Bingge heard the warmth. Shen Qingqiu could see him hear it.

Close the door. Close the door close the door close the —

He kept talking. He should not have kept talking. He kept talking anyway because the alternative was silence, and in the silence Bingge would hear the warmth and draw his own conclusions, and Bingge's conclusions would be accurate.

"You have six hundred wives and don't love any of them," Shen Qingqiu said.

He didn't say it as an accusation. He said it as someone who had spent years studying this and had reached a conclusion he'd never expected to deliver in person.

"They're what you built to fill the space where love was supposed to go, and they didn't work, and you knew they didn't work, and you kept building anyway because the alternative was admitting the space existed."

He watched the mask hold. Watched it cost something to hold.

"You didn't kiss me tonight because you wanted me," Shen Qingqiu said.

He should stop talking. He should stop talking *right now*. The Seer framework was thin enough to see through and he was standing in his nightclothes delivering a character analysis he had first drafted on a forum in his previous life and the recipient of the analysis was *real* and *here* and looking at him with an expression that was going to require its own drawer.

He did not stop talking.

"You kissed me because I saw you. Because I described your life back to you and didn't flinch. And something in you decided — "

He paused. Chose his next words with the precision of a man navigating a field of blades.

"I know how you think," Shen Qingqiu said, softer now, and the softness was the most dangerous part. And it was dangerous because it was real, because it was the same softness

that had painted those canvases, because it was the part of Shen Yuan that had never learned the difference between analyzing a character and loving one.

"The way you see things. As things that are not yours but will become yours. That's how you built an empire. That's how you filled six hundred rooms."

He met those crimson eyes. His own were stinging again. He blamed the lamplight.

"That's what terrifies me. You see me as a thing to acquire. And I don't think you know the difference between wanting someone and wanting to own the feeling they gave you."

A pause. Then, quieter with the Seer's mask slipping into something that was pure Shen Yuan, wry and sad and absolutely certain:

"I am not one of your wives. I am not a territory to be conquered or a rare artifact to be obtained for your treasure room. I already belong to my Luo Binghe."

The space where love was supposed to go.

He reached for the contempt. It came up in his hands like a weapon he'd carried so long the grip was worn to the shape of his fingers.

It wouldn't hold its edge.

Because the analysis was correct. Every word. The wives. The acquisition. He had heard his own logic described to him by a person wearing the face of his abuser and the description had been so precise it felt like being opened on a table.

He could dismiss a wrong reading. Could bury it under contempt, could sneer it out of existence, could make the person who'd offered it feel small enough to regret the attempt.

A right one had nowhere to go.

"How clinical," he said. His voice was ice. The mask performing flawlessly even as the thing behind it pressed upward hard enough to make his vision narrow. "Does this Lord's diagnosis come with a treatment, or merely the satisfaction of having delivered it?"

Shen Qingqiu did not flinch. The green eyes held steady and that was worse — worse than flinching, worse than looking away, because the steadiness said *I know what you're doing* and the steadiness said *the contempt is a defense* and the steadiness said *I have always been able to see through this —*

I already belong to my Luo Binghe.

As though the category contained more than one, and the one Shen Qingqiu had chosen was not him.

The empty place — the one at the center, the one the wives couldn't fill and the throne couldn't fill, and the empire was built to keep him from having to look at — did something he

hadn't felt it do in years.

It agreed.

I already belong to a Luo Binghe.

The word *belong* did something quiet to the ground beneath him. Not a lurch. Not the upward pressing. Just the foundation shifting, settling into a shape he couldn't read. He had always been able to read the ground. He had built an empire on knowing exactly where he stood.

He did not know where he stood.

He should leave.

He did not leave.

Shen Qingqiu watched Luo Binghe, the Emperor of Three Realms, react to his words.

Watched him decide to leave and then not leave. And the not-leaving was a confession the mouth couldn't make — the body refusing what the mind had decided, the feet that wouldn't turn, the shoulders that hadn't squared yet for the walk to the door. Shen Qingqiu was watching a man try to give up on something for the first time in his life, and the trying was visible, and it was the most human thing Bingge had done all evening.

The answer to what Bingge had said earlier was pressing against his teeth. The real answer — not the Seer's version, not the careful framework, but the raw and indefensible truth: *Yes. The devotion was for you. It was always for you. Before I met my husband, before I transmigrated, before I had a body that could hold a brush — you were the first thing I ever loved in either life, and I loved you the way you can only love something you're certain you'll never touch.*

He could not say it. Not because it was wrong — it was devastatingly, catastrophically right — but because saying it to this man while his husband's robes hung over the chair would be a cruelty to both Binghes and a truth his marriage wasn't ready to hold without conversation.

So he held it. Felt it pressing against his teeth — alive, whole, true, and unsayable — and did not open his mouth.

Luo Binghe watched Shen Qingqiu not answer. And the not-answering said something too. It said *you're not wrong enough to correct and you're not right enough to agree with* and the expression that crossed Shen Qingqiu's face was the one that would live behind Luo Binghe's eyelids for a very long time.

His gaze went to the paintings one last time. The throne. The fire. The bust on the desk with its wrong-soft eyes. His most private moments, rendered in paint and clay by hands that knew him.

He had never given up on anything in his life before.

Not in the woodshed. Not in the Abyss. Not on the empire or the throne or the conquering of three realms. Not on six hundred attempts to build a room where the emptiness couldn't reach him.

And now a man had painted his loneliness with steady hands and spoken his worst hours back to him with grief instead of horror and looked at him with wonder — wonder, as though the bare fact of his existence was extraordinary — and told him *I would be the person who helped.* Had given him all of that freely. Without being asked. Without being compelled. Without the transaction that governed every other interaction in his life.

The first thing anyone had ever simply given him.

And grief on your behalf was not a territory you conquered. Someone looking at your worst moments and saying *I would be the person who helped* was not a wife you could collect. It just existed. It asked nothing. It arrived without an exchange rate and could not be repaid and could not be owned and could not be kept.

It could only be received.

And he did not know how to receive things. He had never learned. The woodshed had not taught receiving. The Abyss had not taught receiving. The empire had been built specifically so he would never have to.

He made himself turn around.

Behind him, Shen Qingqiu's breath caught. Not in fear. Something else — something Luo Binghe could hear but chose not to interpret, because interpreting it would mean acknowledging that the man who painted him might not want him to go, and that was a piece of evidence the dead thing could not be trusted with.

Then, suddenly, there was the sound of footsteps in the corridor. Fast. Not the measured pace of servants or the careful approach of someone uncertain. The sound of someone running — flat out, no restraint, the specific desperate speed of a person who had been fighting to get here and had finally, finally reached the door.

It slammed open.

Luo Binghe stood in the doorway of his bedroom, breathing hard. Travel-stained and injured. He had a split lip, a bruise darkening along his jaw, and spiritual residue crackling across torn robes. He had come through the same dimensional scarring that had deposited the other in the outer corridors, had landed somewhere in the palace, and had run.

He took in the room in one heartbeat. His Shizun with his robes disordered, hair wrecked, clutching his own clothes shut with white-knuckled fists. A version of himself standing too close.

And on his Shizun's throat, just above the collar where the fabric had shifted — a mark. Dark. Fresh.

Not his.

The sound that came out of Luo Binghe was not language.

Xin Mo was in his hand before the thought completed — the blade screaming in resonance with its twin, the one at the hip of the man wearing his face and standing too close to his husband in a room that smelled like — that smelled like —

Bath oil. Ink. The Moonfire Silk.

The room smelled like their bedroom after an evening together and there was a mark on Shizun's throat that Luo Binghe had not put there.

"How *dare* you. You touched him."

The words tore out of him. Not the controlled fury of the demon emperor. Not the polished threat of a man who had learned to wield his anger with precision. This was the raw thing — the boy underneath, the one who had spent years earning every touch, memorizing every permission, learning the exact pressure that made Shizun shiver and the exact angle that made him sigh and the exact place on his throat where teeth could press and —

Someone else had pressed there. Someone else had left evidence. Someone else's mouth on his husband's skin, in his bed, in the room where his robes hung over the chair and his teacup sat on the desk.

Demonic energy erupted. The floor cracked. The paintings on the wall shuddered in their frames. The other stepped back — not flinching, not retreating, but acknowledging the pressure the way you acknowledged a blade at your throat and reassessing the threat level.

Good. He should reassess.

"Binghe." The voice of a man who had extensive experience managing demonic emotional escalation in enclosed spaces. "Please don't kill him in our bedroom."

Chapter End Notes

Last chapter ended with Bingge deciding SQQ was his. The paintings were for him. The devotion was for him. He was ready to claim what he was owed. Classic og!LBH: see, want, take.

I know what the expected version of this chapter looks like. You've read it. I've read it. Original Luo Binghe shows up, sees something he wants, the acquisition engine kicks in. Maybe he kidnaps SQQ, maybe he claims him, maybe there's a dramatic confrontation where Bingge is terrifying and possessive and SQQ has to be rescued.

But the paintings are the hinge that swings this chapter in a completely different direction. The PIDW protagonist, who has spent centuries building an empire to fill a space that nothing fills, walks into a room and discovers someone has been quietly mourning that emptiness on his behalf. Being seen by someone who looked at his worst moments and responded with grief instead of horror is so far outside his operating framework that the acquisition engine just... stalls. SQQ tells him the six hundred wives are what he built to fill the space where love was supposed to go, and the analysis is so precise that the dismissal can't get purchase on it. A wrong reading, Bingge could dismiss. A right one has nowhere to go.
So instead of acquisition, the scene turns on heartbreak and longing. Bingge gives up. For the first time. On anything. Ever. He's not defeated exactly, just changed. Cracked open by the knowledge that someone looked at his loneliness and called it by its name and grieved for him.

But before he can leave, our Bingmei shows up and... well. You'll see in the next chapter.

Chapter 4: The Mirror

Chapter Notes

> POV housekeeping: I went omniscient for parts of this chapter because close-third couldn't hold three people being mortified at the same time.
>
> Close POV interludes are in italics so you know when you're inside someone's head. Bingmei's interludes are marked Luo Binghe because it's his reality and he gets home advantage. Bingge's are marked Emperor Luo because that's what he is and he'd insist.
>
> Thanks for reading!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

— Luo Binghe —

Luo Binghe crossed the room quickly to his husband. His hands came up — careful, so careful, the hands of a person who had spent years learning to touch gently — and cradled his Shizun's face.

His thumb found the bruise on husband's throat. The blood mites responded before the thought completed — flooding the broken capillaries, dissolving the mark from the inside out. Erasing it. The evidence of another man's mouth was not going to exist on this skin for one second longer than it took Luo Binghe to reach it.

"Shizun." Barely a whisper. The rage was still in the room — in the cracked floor, in the humming blade — but his voice was none of those things. His voice was gentle. "Did he hurt you?"

Shizun's hands — the ones that had been clutching his inner robe shut since before Binghe arrived, holding the single layer closed because he had been in one layer when the Other One had — his hands were shaking. The knuckles white around the fabric but the fabric kept slipping, the fumbling of someone who had been trying to hold himself together by grip alone and was losing.

One of them came up and settled over Binghe's hand on his face.

"No," he said. Quiet. Meeting Binghe's eyes. "He didn't hurt me."

But his gaze slid sideways when he said it. Just for a fraction of a second. Just the smallest flinch of eye contact, the tell he knew too well. It was the truth, but not all of it.

Luo Binghe caught it but did not press. He would not with the Other One still in the room.

Under his thumb, the bruise was gone. The skin was smooth. As if no one else had ever touched this throat.

Luo Binghe shrugged off his own outer robe. He didn't think about it — the thought and the action were the same movement, the way drawing a blade was one movement, the way stepping between Shizun and danger was one movement. He settled it over his Shizun's shoulders, and then, his hands found the ties and closed them. Inner robe first, then the heavier outer layer over it — his own, too large, the shoulders too broad, the sleeves pooling past Shen Qingqiu's fingertips.

His Shizun's hands dropped to his sides and Luo Binghe saw his shoulders relax.

His forehead dropped against Shizun's — the gesture that meant *I'm here, you're here, we're alright* — and for one breath, two, the rest of the room ceased to exist.

Then his eyes lifted to the man across the room.

The tenderness vanished.

— Emperor Luo —

The Emperor of the Three Realms, Luo Binghe, watched them.

The Imposter holding Shen Qingqiu's face so close that their foreheads were touching. The thumb on the throat, erasing his mark — the one thing he had left on this person, dissolved under a touch so practiced it was reflex.

Neither of them were looking at him.

Emperor Luo Binghe had conquered three realms. Had filled a palace with six hundred women and sat on a throne of bones and bent the world until it acknowledged him.

The Imposter had done *nothing* to earn his husband except be born into a world where the right teacher happened to be kind. He had simply been *lucky*, the way that Emperor Luo Binghe had never been lucky. And that accident of luck had produced this warmth. This person who had been a witness to *his* life and cared and now leaned into another Luo Binghe's touch.

The unfairness of it sat in his chest like a second Xin Mo — black and heavy and humming with a frequency that wanted to cut things.

He aimed for the wound.

"Those paintings," he said. His voice cut through the room. The Imposter's head turned — eyes crimson, every line reading threat — but Emperor Luo Binghe was not looking at the Imposter.

He was looking at the paintings on the wall.

"Every painting in this room is a scene from my life." He looked at Shen Qingqiu. Directly. Past the Imposter's protective stance. "He saw *me* first."

The words landed.

"Before you existed." He aimed his words at the Imposter now. "Before you were soft and saved. He looked into the future and he saw *me*. He painted *me*. He grieved for *me*. He spent years devoted to a Luo Binghe that is not you. Has never been you."

A pause. The pause of a man letting a blade settle before twisting.

"Will *never* be you."

He watched the words find the wound — because it was his wound too, the same wound, the same fear wearing a different face. *Am I enough? Or am I the replacement for the one he wanted first?*

"He loved *me* first," Luo Binghe said. Quiet now. The gentleness of a blade that had found its mark. "You simply benefited from my pain."

A pause.

"You're welcome."

— Luo Binghe —

He spent years devoted to a Luo Binghe that is not you.

His hands went numb.

He had healed. Had stood in the alcove and heard *it was me, it was always me* and the joy had rewritten everything. The wound had closed. The scar tissue had formed. He had built a life on the certainty that the paintings were his.

And now the Other One had fitted a new blade into the old groove with the accuracy of someone who shared the wound's exact dimensions, and the scar was splitting open and the healed thing was raw again and he was standing in front of the paintings seeing them for the first time as —

Not me. He looked into the future and he saw — not me.

His hands. Not his. His throne. Not his. The loneliness, the fire, the hours in the dark — not his, never his, those were the Other One's hours and the Other One's dark and the brushstrokes were the other one's brushstrokes and Shizun had stayed up all night mixing inks for that face, that loneliness, that version of the boy in the woodshed who grew up and became —

He loved me first. He loved me first. He loved me first.

The repetition was not thought. The repetition was the feeling cycling through him like blood, each pass driving it deeper, each pass making the old wound wider, and his body was doing the thing it did when the container broke — standing very still while everything inside it flooded. The paintings watched him from the walls. The same face he shaved every morning. The same jaw, the same cheekbones, the same mouth. But the eyes in the paintings were cold and the coldness was the point — Shizun had seen the coldness and the devotion had been for the coldness, for the loneliness, for the version that matched the art and not the version that matched the life.

Was it me? Was it ever me?

He was fifteen again. In the alcove. In the dark. Surrounded by paintings of a demon lord he didn't recognize as himself, choking on the certainty that Shizun loved someone else. He had survived it then. Had crawled through the Abyss and come back and earned his place and been told *it was always you* and believed it.

But the other one had just stood in this room and proved that the demon lord was a real person. Not an abstract. Not a road not taken. A man with a voice and a hunger and a mouth that had kissed Shizun against a wall and left evidence.

The spiral was pulling him under. The familiar drowning — the jealousy that ate everything, the desperate logic of *maybe if I become more, become better, become enough* — and it would have taken him. It would have swallowed him whole the way it had at fifteen, at seventeen, at every point in the years between when the wound was open and the only treatment was more.

But.

You simply benefited from my pain.

The words snagged. Caught on something inside the spiral that the spiral couldn't digest. Because the statement was wrong.

Not wrong about the suffering. Wrong about what it had cost.

Wrong about easy.

And the wrongness was enough — one solid handhold in the flood — because Luo Binghe had not been given this life. He had bled for it. Had crawled through the Abyss for it. Had practised gentleness on stones because his hands had forgotten how to be soft. Had confessed in a water prison and been kidnapped by his own father and carried the wrong answer for years and stayed anyway — not because he knew the paintings were his, but because Shizun was worth staying for even if the paintings weren't.

The spiral broke.

The sound that came out of him was not the one he'd planned. What came out instead was raw, and young, and torn from somewhere behind his ribs that he'd thought he'd sealed years ago.

"You think it was *easy*?"

His hands were shaking. He could feel that, distantly. Could feel the heat climbing his throat, the pressure behind his eyes, the old wound reopening with the specific cruelty of something that had never fully closed.

The words tore out of him before the thought finished forming. Something hot and vast had cracked open behind his ribs and he could not have stopped the flood of it if he'd tried.

"You have *no idea* what those paintings cost me."

— Omniscient POV —

Shen Qingqiu made a noise like a man watching his own execution begin. “Binghe,” he tried weakly, “Emperor Luo really doesn’t need to hear—”

“He thinks I had it easy, Shizun!”

"Yes, I heard him, Binghe. And he can keep thinking that."

“He thinks I was just given this!“

"Yes, well, perhaps we could simply —"

“Shizun, I have to tell him. I'm telling him all of it. From the beginning."

"From the —" Shen Qingqiu's eyes widened a fraction. "Binghe. Surely we can summarise."

"No."

Shen Qingqiu looked at his husband — flushed, trembling, already too far gone to redirect — and closed his eyes.

His husband, his *Bingmei*, wanted to narrate the most humiliating chapter of their shared history to a hostile audience who was none other than the original PIDW stallion protagonist himself. *Bingge*.

"Fine," he said, with the air of a man stepping politely off a cliff. "Fine. Tell him." Shen Qingqiu's hand moved — the instinctive reach for a fan that was lying on the desk across the room. He glanced at it. Glanced at the distance. Made the decision, with visible dignity, that he was not going to cross a room full of Luo Binghes to retrieve a coping mechanism.

There were three people in the room:

One about to speak.

One about to regret giving permission for that one to speak.

And one who had not yet been told what this was going to cost him.

"For *years*," Luo Binghe began, having received approval from his husband, and turned to the Other One. "I didn't even think they were of me."

"...You what."

"I thought they were of Tianlang-Jun."

"...Tianlang-Jun."

The word came out flat. The Emperor of a different reality's brain encountering an obstacle it could not navigate.

— Emperor Luo —

Tianlang-Jun. His father. The paintings — the throne, the conquests, the fire, the hours alone — the evidence of devotion he had been claiming all evening —

The Imposter had looked at those paintings. His face. His most private moments. And thought they were of his father.

Something contemptuous assembled itself behind his teeth. But the contempt was already doing a peculiar thing — folding back on itself, becoming something more specific and more personal than contempt usually was.

More intimate than anything he'd aimed at enemies or the weak. The Imposter had looked at a portrait made with devotion and concluded, with apparent confidence, that it could not be of him. That whoever the face belonged to, it was not someone Shen Qingqiu would love.

The Imposter had looked at his own face and not recognized it as worth loving.

Emperor Luo Binghe found this, quietly and with great precision, infuriating.

— Omniscient POV —

"You looked at paintings of your own face," the Emperor of Three Realms said. "And you decided they were of someone else."

"I was fourteen. One night, I was attending to my duties as a disciple, ensuring my Shizun had everything, when I saw him pull back a bookshelf and open a hidden room— "

"Where, exactly, were you observing from?"

"From outside." Said as though this was exonerating.

"You watched him through a window. So you were peeping."

"It was not peeping — it was attentive —"

"So you were stalking your Shizun." Flat. Already reclassifying. "Continue."

Shen Qingqiu had gone very still as the understanding of his own life was being quietly revised.

"I thought you were a white lotus," he said with disbelief as he processed the revelation. "For years I thought you were the gentlest, most attentive, most innocent — and you were *stalking* me."

"Shizun, no! It was a disciple's responsibility —"

He pressed two fingers to the bridge of his nose — Luo Binghe knew the gesture: it meant *I need everyone to stop talking so I can have a crisis in peace.*

"Of course you were." Shen Qingqiu's hand had dropped from his nose. He was looking at his former disciple with slow, dawning horror, reassessing years of memories in real time. None of it reassuring.

A memory surfaced. Then another. Then several, arriving with the speed of dominoes falling in a line that had been set up years ago and only now been tipped. "That is — I cannot believe I did not see this."

And then the last memory arrived, and Shen Qingqiu's face underwent a journey.

The evenings after the baths, when he would walk around the bamboo house in a single inner robe because his disciple had already retired for the night and was safely behind a closed door. Was not — was certainly not —

"*As I was saying*, I investigated," Bingmei said, loud enough to physically drag the conversation past the detour. His ears had gone red. "And I found the hidden alcove filled with years of artwork. It was only natural for me to conclude —"

"You mean," the visitor said, enunciating each word like a charge being filed, "the one you only knew about because you had been *peeping* through his window."

"— that Shizun had a secret love affair with a powerful demon lord."

Something tightened at the corner of the Emperor's mouth.

Two people in the room were trying very hard not to laugh. Bingge behind his mask of stoicism and Shen Qingqiu behind his hands. Bingmei, who was completely sincere, did not notice either of them.

"That was your obvious conclusion. You looked at a shrine of devotion. To your own face. And concluded the paintings depicted someone else."

"It was an archival studio, not a shrine." Clipped. Precise. A thesis Shen Qingqiu knew he was losing.

"I didn't have the demon mark yet, I didn't know what—"

"Are you face blind?"

"I am not face blind — I was a *child*." Bingmei turned back to him with heat that was building rather than fading. "I was a child with no knowledge of my heritage. No one had ever told me my father was the Heavenly Demon. How could I know they were of me?"

"By looking?"

"The paintings showed a grown man with a demon mark I didn't have and power I couldn't imagine. *This is me in the future* is not the logical conclusion someone makes when finding a secret shrine at fourteen. There was no evidence—"

"The evidence was your face."

"— studio —" Shen Qingqiu had given up on dignity and was now defending nomenclature, which was somehow worse. "It was really more of an archival studio, not a shrine."

Bingge looked, with great deliberation, at all the paintings and then back at Shen Qingqiu.

The painting did not need to say anything. The painting was the argument.

Shen Qingqiu's mouth opened. The word *archival* was visibly forming — assembling itself behind his teeth with the desperate resolve of a last soldier preparing to charge alone. He looked at the Bingge's face.

His mouth closed.

— Emperor Luo —

The laugh had wanted to happen. He had killed it. But it had wanted to happen, and the wanting was — unexpected.

Fourteen was a defensible position. He allowed this. A child of fourteen with no heritage, no demon mark, no understanding of what he was, looking at paintings of a demon emperor in his prime — the conclusion that the figure was someone else was not, in itself, the failure mode of a defective brain.

Emperor Luo Binghe conceded the point. Briefly.

His gaze travelled the wall once — scanning the paintings with the demon mark fully on display. He moved on.

— Omniscient POV —

"Putting all that aside — in the Abyss," the Emperor said. "You found Xin Mo. It's in every painting."

"I thought it was my father's."

"You thought it was —" He stopped. "At no point during your time in the Abyss, did you look at the very sword in almost every painting and consider even briefly —"

"And why *couldn't* it have been Tianlang-Jun's?" the man married to Shen Qingqiu said. "It was a perfectly reasonable conclusion —"

"There were *centuries'* worth of bones around it. It had been in the Abyss longer than Tianlang-Jun has been alive."

Bingmei's jaw did something complicated. The pause that followed was slightly too long for a man with a ready answer.

"It — it could just have been very good at killing things around it."

Bingge looked at Bingmei the way one might look at a hole in a bucket that you can been asked to carry water in.

"But when you had emerged from the Abyss." His voice had thinned. Patience wearing through. "When you had come into your power. When you were wearing your own demon mark on your forehead. Surely, you would have recognised it was you when you looked into a mirror. When you were actively conquering the demon world wearing the same outfits as the figure in the paintings —"

"They weren't the same outfits exactly—"

"Demon emperor formalwear has a limited palette."

"...That is true," Shen Qingqiu said, very quietly, clearly wishing the words back inside his mouth.

Bingmei turned to him with an expression of concentrated betrayal.

"The color palette is limited, Binghe. It's a factual observation."

"You are supposed to be on my side." Bingmei whinged.

"I am on the side of accuracy."

“So, you emerged from the Abyss with the same sword, the same mark, and the same wardrobe as in the paintings, looked in a mirror and said *ah yes, someone else's face*. Somehow the truth still evaded you.”

“You were not there.”

“No. I was enduring actual hardship,” said Bingge, ”Forgive my lack of perspective.”

There was, the Emperor of Three Realms noted with some distance, ink on his sleeve. He had not put it there. At some point during this conversation, he had rested his arm on a surface where the Imposter lived and worked and conducted the apparently catastrophic business of his marriage, and some trace of it had transferred.

He drew breath. Released. Drew. Released. The discipline was old and well-practiced.

“You talk about years of now knowing the paintings were of you, but at any point," he said. "Did it occur to you. To simply ask him."

"Ask him?"

"About the paintings."

Silence.

"He did confront me about them," Shen Qingqiu said. He had closed his eyes. Bracing. "I told him I'd never met Tianlang-Jun. And he decided that meant I was being evasive rather than — rather than literal."

"Shizun was clearly hiding something!" Bingmei's voice had gone hot and defensive and he could hear, even as he said it, that this was not going to hold up. "When he said he'd never met Tianlang-Jun, his face did the — the thing it does when he's telling the truth but not all the truth, and I —"

"He told you directly." The Emperor's voice had gone quiet again. "And you chose not to believe him."

"Because he was being *evasive*—"

"I was answering the question—"

"You could have said: *it's you, the paintings are of you*—"

"And explain what, exactly?" Shen Qingqiu's voice had gone sharp. His most reasonable option was also the most mortifying, and it showed. "That your Shizun had spent years painting prophetic visions of you as a grown man? In detail? The alcove was — there were dozens of pieces, and some of them were very—" He stopped. His ears darkened another shade. "It was a *hobby*. People are allowed to have private creative pursuits without being subjected to interrogation about them."

"It was a secret room," the Other One pressed, "full of paintings of your student."

"It was an alcove. It was a perfectly normal — it was a private artistic —" He could hear himself. Luo Binghe could see the exact moment his husband heard himself, because the flush that had been confined to his ears spread decisively down both sides of his neck. "It would have raised questions I was not prepared to answer."

"So instead you let him believe you were in love with his father.”

"I did not let him — I told him the truth! I said I'd never met Tianlang-Jun!"

"And then declined to elaborate."

Shen Qingqiu's mouth opened. Closed. His hand came up — not the fan, which was still across the room, a fact he was beginning to deeply regret — and covered the lower half of his face in a gesture that was technically the bridge-of-nose press but had migrated south under pressure.

“You were too embarrassed to tell me the paintings were of me." Bingmei said, something warm and almost wondering, even through the sting of the memory.

"I was maintaining appropriate professional boundaries—"

"You were embarrassed that you had obsessively painted— "

“It was not obsessive. It was simply *thematically consistent*.”

— Shen Qingqiu POV —

This was agony. Not the dignified kind — not the noble suffering of a cultivator enduring a spiritual trial, the kind you could write poetry about. This was the squirming, face-in-hands, please-let-the-earth-open-and-consume-me kind. This was, quite possibly, the single most embarrassing thing that had ever happened to a Shen Qingqiu in any timeline.

The worst part wasn't the content. He'd lived through all of it. He knew how ridiculous it sounded from the outside — had known since the mirror call with Shang Qinghua, who had summarized the situation with devastating accuracy: He made up a guy to be jealous of and the guy was him.

The worst part was that Bingmei was narrating it all with the absolute sincerity of someone who still, even now, did not fully appreciate the cosmic absurdity of what he'd put himself through. His husband had suffered genuinely and catastrophically from a misunderstanding that could have been resolved if Shen Qingqiu had simply said those paintings are of you instead of dying of embarrassment at the prospect of explaining to his teenage disciple why he'd spent years building what amounted to a private fan shrine. Because that's what the alcove was: a fan shrine. To his own student. Curated with the obsessive dedication of someone maintaining a secret collection — which it had been, and which Shen Qingqiu would take to his grave if his husband would stop telling people about it.

And now Bingmei was presenting this history to the other version of himself as evidence of the difficulty of his romantic journey, and Bingge was looking at him like a strategist watching someone set fire to his own supply lines. Bingmei had always been capable of extraordinary leaps of logic — he could connect any three unrelated facts into a narrative of betrayal with the speed and conviction of a man who had never once in his life encountered an event he couldn't make about his own feelings. Gold medalist in the sport of jumping to conclusions. And somehow, impossibly, Tianlang-Jun had turned out to be exactly the same.

Shen Qingqiu pressed both hands harder against his own face — he could feel the heat of the blush through his palms, which was not reassuring — and wished, not for the first time, that he had been transmigrated into a story with fewer Luo Binghes.

— Omniscient POV —

"I spent *years* in this." Luo Binghe's voice had dropped — not for effect, but because the anger had burned through to something older underneath it. Something that didn't shout. "Years believing Shizun loved someone else. So, I went to find Tianlang-Jun."

"To do what?"

"To confront him."

"For what."

"For — I accused him of throwing away my Shizun's affection—"

The Emperor waited. His understanding of the phrase *bad decision* was expanding.

"You went," he said slowly, "to confront the man you believed was your Shizun's secret lover. To accuse him. Of not loving him enough."

"Of abandoning him."

"Either way. You decided that the appropriate response to discovering that your Shizun was in love with a sealed demon lord was to go and hold the demon lord accountable."

"It was an act of —"

"An act of what, exactly."

A pause.

"...love."

Silence held a beat that lasted slightly too long. Something had shifted in the quality of his attention — as if the conversation, which had been an exercise in contempt, had just become something else. Something he hadn't expected. Something behind his ribs shifted at the word *love.* He moved on.

"And what happened after you went to a sealed demon emperor and accused him of romantic neglect of your Shizun?"

"He was half mad and couldn't remember Shizun and didn't even recognize the name Shen Qingqiu."

"Because I had literally never met him," Shen Qingqiu said, from next to his husband, weary, precise — a point he had made before and not been believed then either.

"That made me so angry," Luo Binghe continued, because the pressure behind the words was greater than any force available to stop them. "I accused Tianlang-Jun of abandoning the person who loved him. I said that I should kill him for it, but that I'd let him rot. I told him — then I gloated about how I would take over the demon world and make Shizun see me."

"Binghe," Shen Qingqiu said faintly.

"...And then?"

"...Tianlang-Jun became curious."

"You don't say." Emperor Luo Binghe said this sarcastically. Four revelations ago, he had seen this coming. He was simply waiting for the rest of the avalanche.

"About my Shizun—"

"Yes, I had inferred that part."

The husband stopped. Swallowed.

"After I left, he sent Zhuzhi-Lang to find the person I'd just asked him about."

Silence.

"And then Shizun was kidnapped!" Bingmei exclaimed, "By a giant snake demon. Who swallowed him—"

"I really don't think Emperor Luo needs to hear about the swallowing," Shen Qingqiu said, his voice slightly strangled.

"— and brought him to Tianlang-Jun's hidden estate, where he was held for a week—"

The Emperor's expression had undergone a slow, terrible transformation during this recitation. The flat incredulity had deepened into something rawer — watching an avalanche assemble itself from individual snowflakes, unable to look away.

"You went to your rival — that you made up —" he said, and his voice was quiet — the restraint audible. "Asked him if he abandoned a lover. That you named. And then he took them."

He was no longer asking. He was assembling. A general who had received several pieces of intelligence in succession and was, with cold rapidity, putting them together into a single understanding of what had happened on his battlefield.

"You went to Tianlang-Jun and then you — for what purpose I cannot reconstruct — provided him with a detailed, longing description of a Peak Lord on Cang Qiong who had been silently devoted to him for years. And when he, predictably, took the only logical action —"

"It was not predictable —"

"You constructed a fiction, presented it as fact, and then were outraged when someone else acted on it. Because Tianlang-Jun took *your* fiction and committed so fully to the narrative that he convinced himself it was fact. You are both — the two of you are not merely individually delusional. You are *multiplicatively* delusional."

“I didn't tell him to—"

“If one of my wives invented a rival, introduced me to her, and then complained I became interested, I would assume she had suffered a *qi deviation*.”

"You created your own love rival," the other one said. "And lost your Shizun to him."

—Luo Binghe POV—

The words didn't land so much as arrive — crossing the room with the unhurried precision of something that had always been true and was only now being said aloud. He felt them hit his chest like a physical thing. His hands clenched at his sides. His breath stuttered.

“You created your own love rival and lost your Shizun to him.” the Other One had said.

He had known this. Had stood in this room with Shizun and traced the full chain of cause and effect and understood, with the specific horror of retrospective clarity, exactly what he had done.

But hearing it said by someone else — by someone wearing his face and using his voice and delivering the summary with the clinical efficiency of a man who would never have made such a stupid mistake — was different.

It was so much worse. It was the difference between knowing you fell and having someone hand you the poem describing it and a painting depicting it.

Luo Binghe straightened. The words had landed, and they had hurt, and he was going to use them as kindling.

— Omniscient POV —

"You think I *benefited*." His voice was steady in a way that cost him. "Let me tell you what the benefit looked like." His spine locked. His chin came up. "The entire cultivation world decided Shizun was — was —" The indignation was feeding on its own momentum now, pulling material from every direction. "People were writing stories about Shizun and Tianlang-Jun—"

Luo Binghe's voice had gone slightly strangled on the last word.

"Why?" the Emperor asked.

"Because of the love letters! Tianlang-Jun wrote fake love letters and planted them as evidence against Shizun. And then they escaped."

"How does a love letter escape?"

The Imposter made a vague, dismissive gesture that communicated very clearly that he would prefer not to elaborate on the mechanism by which forged love letters had entered general

circulation.

The Emperor of Three Realms' eyes narrowed. Something had caught in the mechanism of his attention — some detail that didn't fit. "And *why* would Tianlang-Jun even write fake love letters," he said slowly, "to a person he had never heard of, about a relationship that never existed?"

Luo Binghe opened his mouth. Closed it.

"You said he couldn't remember anything," the Emperor continued, pulling a thread he could already see the end of. "Shen Qingqiu told you they'd never met. So why would Tianlang-Jun forge evidence of a relationship he didn't know about?"

Silence.

"Because," Luo Binghe said, and his voice had gone very flat, "he stole my plan."

The Emperor stared at him.

"I had — there was a strategy. To isolate Shizun. I was going to expose his connections to the demon world, fabricate evidence if necessary, so the sects would turn on him and he'd have no one left to —"

"You were going to create a crisis, and then solve the crisis you'd created so he'd be grateful."

"It was more nuanced than —"

"And you told Tianlang-Jun of your plan," the Other One said, "then he simply did it first."

"Tianlang-Jun," the husband of Shen Qingqiu said, with deliberate flatness, "had circulated the letters as evidence. Of an affair. Between himself and Shizun. The objective being, as previously discussed, to isolate Shizun from the cultivation world by manufacturing a connection to a demon lord."

"Using your plan."

"Using a similar approach."

Bingge looked at Bingmei. The look did not need words. The look was doing the work of an entire argument without the overhead of syllables.

“So your complaint,” he said at last, “is *plagiarism*."

"And then the cultivation world —"

"They enjoyed them," Shen Qingqiu said, from the desk, sounding like someone who had not yet recovered from the relevant news cycle. "They enjoyed them so much that they reproduced the letters into multiple editions using talismanic printing.”

"*Illustrated* editions." Bingmei said, with intense indignation about this part of the recap. "Twelve volumes."

"Twelve."

"The artist was prolific and —"

The Emperor's brain encountered the word *prolific* and visibly declined to engage with it. "Stop—"

“— there were even *puppet shows!*”

The Emperor closed his eyes.

"And there were factions," Shen Qingqiu said, into the silence. Helpfully.

"The Demonic Seduction Conspiracy faction—"

"I do not require—"

"—who held that I had been corrupted by demonic influence—”

“—any elaboration. That is—”

"—the Tragic Devotion faction, who held that I was a victim of an unrequited love that had ruined me—"

"*Enough*."

It landed. Shen Qingqiu paused. The command pitch had cut through.

For one breath, the room obeyed.

Then Bingmei — as though just remembering — said: "Oh. And there was also a poll."

The Emperor's gaze tracked, slowly, from Shen Qingqiu to Bingmei.

“Regarding preferred interpretations," Bingmei clarified. He was warming to the topic. The injustice of it was clearly substantial and he intended to itemise. “The results were published. In a serialised pamphlet.”

The Emperor's hand moved toward his forehead.

He arrested the gesture halfway. The hand returned to his side. He paused.

"There was a —” Shen Qingqiu added, “there was even a preferred ending in which I ended up with both of them."

"*Stop*."

He closed his eyes. It was a brief gesture — perhaps two seconds — but it was the first time since his arrival that anything resembling human overwhelm had surfaced on his face. When he opened them, the expression that had been attempting to form had been executed and buried.

"I see," he said.

He did not see.

He looked, very briefly, as if he was beginning to see, and then was attempting, with admirable discipline, to un-see.

He looked at the Imposter.

He looked at the paintings on the wall.

He looked, briefly, at his own hands, in the manner of a man checking that he had not, during this last hour, somehow incurred fan fiction of his own without his knowledge.

For a moment — brief, unprecedented, and deeply uncomfortable — all three of them were experiencing the same emotion. Bingmei, because his marriage had been turned into illustrated fiction. Shen Qingqiu because he had been the centerpiece. The Emperor of Three Realms, because this information now existed inside his head and could not be removed.

The room held the silence the way a room holds the silence after someone has dropped something expensive. Nobody wanted to be the one to speak first.

"You created your own love rival out of your own father —"

"It wasn't like *that*—"

"— then handed him a fully workable scheme to take your Shizun —"

"He was imprisoned and sealed! How was I supposed to know that—"

"— and so he took your Shizun."

"I was able to get him back after a week —"

"You handed your father the manual on how to take your Shizun. And you gave a love rival a seven-day trial period."

Something structural was assembling itself behind the Emperor's expression — the focus that came after horror had burned through to analysis. He was seeing a pattern. A willingness to commit fully to a narrative constructed on no evidence because the narrative was compelling. The Imposter had built a tragedy out of his own face in a painting. His father had built a love affair out of a stranger's accusation. And neither of them had, at any point, verified a single assumption.

Like father, like son. Both of them writing fiction and calling it intelligence.

“It wasn’t that bad, really,” Shen Qingqiu said, and something happened to the room.

Every person in it heard the sentence arrive and understood, at different speeds and for different reasons, that it was a catastrophe.

Shen Qingqiu heard it leave his mouth and knew immediately that this had not been the intervention he’d hoped to make. Bingmei’s head turned slowly toward his husband with the expression of someone watching a friendly-fire incident in real time. And the Emperor of the Three Realms went very carefully still, because if he turned his head right now, his face was going to do something.

“It was a *polite* kidnapping,” Shen Qingqiu continued, because apparently the first sentence had not been sufficient and his mouth had decided to make it worse.

“Tianlang-Jun was... hospitable. The pocket dimension was quite comfortable. He was very respectful of — of boundaries, and—"

"Hospitable," Luo Binghe repeated.

"It was more of a — an extended scholarly visit, really—"

"Shen Qingqiu, look at me." the stallion protagonist asked.

Shen Qingqiu did not look at him.

"Did you sleep well during your stay with Tianlang-Jun?"

"Well, the — the mattress was very—" Shen Qingqiu appeared to realize he was describing the quality of another man's bedding to his husband and a version of his husband from another reality. He cut himself off with visible effort. "That isn't the point—the *point* is that Tianlang-Jun was a serious scholar. He was — did you know he hybridised the Sound-Resonance Flowers?" Shen Qingqiu's voice had shifted — the voice of someone who had found something genuinely interesting and had briefly forgotten the context in which he was sharing it. "The entire cultivation world assumes they're a naturally occurring species. They're not. He engineered them. Cross-pollinated demon-realm resonance orchids with human-world acoustic mosses over decades, and when the result propagated across three mountain ranges, he simply — he never corrected anyone. He never took credit. He thought it would be *rude* to correct the assumption that they were natural."

A pause.

Shen Qingqiu appeared to hear the quality of his own voice — the warmth that had crept into it, the slightly breathless cadence of someone describing a feat of genius they had not gotten over — and stopped.

"I just meant that —" he said.

"You were attracted to him." The Luo Binghe from another reality said flatly.

Shen Qingqiu's sleeve came up over the lower half of his face — the wide outer sleeve of Binghe's robe, which pooled well past his fingertips and provided significantly more coverage than his own would have. He deployed it with the desperation of a man who had made a catastrophic tactical error forty minutes ago by not retrieving his fan and was now discovering that his husband's oversized sleeves were, in this one specific context, a mercy. A beat of damning silence extended itself across the room.

"That," Shen Qingqiu said, in a voice of immense dignity, "is a very reductive characterization of an extremely complicated—"

"Shizun." His husband's eyes had the desperate clarity of a man watching someone walk toward a cliff and being too far away to grab them.

"It was purely — Tianlang-Jun has a very compelling mind, and the Heavenly Demon bloodline is — one cannot help but acknowledge that the aesthetic qualities of—" He was losing ground rapidly. "He was simply — he was very compelling. In close proximity. For an extended period. And one is not made of stone—"

"You're blushing." The Emperor pointed out.

"I am not blushing, I am experiencing a mild flush from the spiritual pressure in this room—"

He was absolutely blushing. The flush had climbed from his ears down the sides of his neck, and his hand on his own sleeve had gone white-knuckled.

“It was exactly like that,” Luo Binghe said. “That's what I had to *watch*.”

The Emperor's eyes narrowed. “Watch what?”

“I had to watch him *seduce* Shizun through a scrying mirror. Touching his shoulder. Leaning across the table to read the same text. Making him *laugh*.”

Each item landed like a separate charge in an indictment.

“And I could not break the mirror. Because the scrying connection was the only way to obtain the spatial coordinates of the estate. The thing showing me was the thing I needed to save him.”

Shen Qingqiu had gone very still behind Binghe’s oversized sleeve.

“The scrying connection,” he said. His voice had changed — the mortification was still there, but something worse had joined it. “The one I established to contact Shang Qinghua. You could — that had a visual component?”

“Yes, Shizun.”

“I — but the connection was too weak for a visual. It was barely transmitting any audio.”

“Shang Shishu strengthened the connection. It was very clear, Shizun.”

Shen Qingqiu turned. Not all the way — not theatrically. A quarter-turn toward the wall, the kind of pivot that could pass for natural shift in posture and was convincing no one. He was identifying, with the terrible precision of a man reviewing the evidence, exactly which moments of that particular scene had been visible to the command room.

“That was — he was not like that the entire time,” Shen Qingqiu said. “That particular evening was — unusually—” He heard himself. “He was not normally that — it was an *aberration* —”

“How many evenings were there, Shizun,” his husband asked, “against which you are comparing this one.”

Shen Qingqiu did not move. He had committed to the wall now — both hands pressed flat against it, his back to the room. The man who had decided that if he could not see the conversation, the conversation could not see him.

“You were surprised," the Emperor said, "that the Heavenly Demon you believed was romantically connected to Shizun behaved romantically."

“I didn't —”

“You told a lonely imprisoned Heavenly Demon that a beautiful cultivator was his former lover. He then acted as though a beautiful cultivator had loved him. Yet you are outraged at the predictable result of the premise you constructed.”

He looked around the room before continuing.

“So the prophecy was accurate, but no one understood it. The father was innocent, but became guilty through hearing about it. The captive was safer in captivity than in public. The rescue depended on not breaking the instrument of torment. Is every event in this world arranged by a drunk fortune-teller?”

“That would explain several things,” said Shen Qingqiu, from the wall.

“Tianlang-Jun made him *smile*,” Luo Binghe said, and the word came out like something that had been lodged in his chest for months.

"A smile. From your own Shizun. In enemy hands. Your father flirted. Your Shizun blushed. The array remained structurally necessary." A pause. "Truly, the heavens are cruel."

“Don’t mock me.”

“I am not mocking you. I am marvelling at the architecture of your suffering. You built every wall and then complained about the maze.”

“That wasn't even the worst part,” Luo Binghe said, and his voice had gone thin and precise the way it did when the feelings were too large for the container, “Tianlang-Jun offered to cure Shizun’s Without a Cure. Through dual cultivation.”

The Emperor's head turned. Sharp. The first involuntary movement he had made since his arrival.

“Your Shizun was poisoned with Without a Cure?”

“Shizun had Without a Cure for years, since before I —”

“He was *living* with Without a Cure?" The words came out clipped. Something had changed in the quality of his attention — something personal, something that had nothing to do with the imposter's disaster and everything to do with his own. "*How?* Without treatment, the poison —"

“It was managed —”

“I married *twelve* women because of that poison.” The words arrived with the flat precision of a man stating a historical fact that still cost him. "Twelve. Because Without a Cure requires —" He stopped. The breath drew. Released. "And your Shizun simply lived with it for years. Untreated."

“It was not untreated, it was managed — there were methods —”

“And Tianlang-Jun offered himself to cure it through dual cultivation.” The Other One had not moved, but the room had contracted around him.

“With himself or — he offered Zhuzhi-Lang as an alternative —”

“He offered your Shizun a *menu*.”

“And then I had to watch as Tianlang-Jun kissed Shizun’s wrist.”

“Barely,” Shen Qingqiu said, from the wall.

Luo Binghe’s head snapped around.

“*Barely?*”

“I mean briefly.”

“You measured?”

“I *noticed*!”

The Emperor was looking at Shen Qingqiu with an expression that had gone very still. His gaze tracked from the pink ears to the white-knuckled hands to the fact that the man had, at some point during this conversation, turned to face a wall, and then, slowly, back to Luo Binghe.

“It seems clear that Shizun’s type,” he said, with the flat precision of a man stating a military assessment, “is heavenly demon emperors.” His hand moved — a brief, sharp gesture toward

his own hair. The gesture was involuntary. He noted it. Filed it under a category he did not examine. “With notable hair.”

Shen Qingqiu made a strangled sound.

It was the strangled sound of a man who had, over the course of one marriage and two kidnappings, now watched three separate bearers of the Heavenly Demon bloodline perform the same unconscious gesture toward their own hair.

"And you handed him to one." The Emperor's weight shifted forward by a fraction. Not yet a step. Something dangerous had entered his voice — something that had nothing to do with amusement and everything to do with recognition. "You created a rival who was everything you were and then left your Shizun alone with him for a week while he charmed him. While he had him blushing and sleeping well and appreciating the hospitality."

His voice had risen. He seemed to catch himself. The imperial composure reasserted for one breath — and then broke again, because the sheer scale of the stupidity appeared to overwhelm his capacity for restraint.

"What if you hadn't reached him? What if the coordinates hadn't come through? Another week? A month?" He stepped closer. "What if he chose him?"

The words had escaped before he could examine them. They had a heat in them that did not belong to the Emperor, did not belong to the interrogation, did not belong to the careful architecture of contempt he had been maintaining since he arrived in this room. They belonged to something underneath. Something that had looked at those paintings and known exactly what they meant.

He was not asking about the imposter's Shizun.

He was asking about the shape of a life in which someone chose you, and you were too stupid to hold on.

"Shizun wouldn't have—"

"You don't *know* that. You *absolute idiot*."

The words rang in the room like a struck bell.

— Bing-mei POV —

And Luo Binghe stood in his own bedroom with the other one's voice still ringing off the walls, and his mouth was open, and nothing was coming out of it, and every single defense he had — every justification, every but the circumstances were, every I was only fourteen — had been dismantled with such efficient brutality that the empty space where they'd been was almost peaceful.

Because the other one was right.

His eyes were burning. He could feel that — the heat that meant his body had decided to process this through tears rather than words, the way it always did when the feeling was too large for language.

— Omniscient POV —

"And now you are doing it again," the Emperor said.

"Doing what?"

"Looking injured in a way that invites acquittal."

Luo Binghe's eyes widened. "I *am* injured."

"Yes, but *decoratively*."

Shen Qingqiu choked.

Luo Binghe's confused expression deepened, "Shizun?"

"This master swallowed wrong."

“Your tears are doing more work than your reasoning ever did. You look like a concubine that was wronged by poetry. “

“What does that even mean?”

“It’s not his fault that he looks like that when hurt,” Shen Qingqiu said, and immediately wished he hadn’t.

Luo Binghe’s expression went soft and betrayed. “Like what, Shizun?”

Shen Qingqiu was not going to do this. He was not going to look at the tears. He knew that every single time this man turned wet eyes on him, his entire critical faculty dissolved. He knew the trap. He had named the trap. He had extensive personal experience with the trap and he was not going to —

He looked at the tears.

Cute. So cute!

The thought arrived without permission, without shame, without any awareness of context whatsoever. His husband was crying in front of a hostile alternate version of himself during the most humiliating conversation in the history of their marriage and the idiot part of Shen Qingqiu’s brain — the part that had looked at the most powerful man in three realms pouting and thought *rained-on cat* — that part had looked at Luo Binghe’s wet eyes and trembling jaw and thought *cute* and Shen Qingqiu wanted to walk into the sea.

His face did something. He didn't know what it did. But it apparently did enough, because the other Luo Binghe's attention snapped to him with the focus of a predator that had detected movement.

"Are you," the Emperor said slowly, his attention now fully on Shen Qingqiu, "being *compromised* by this? You're actually affected?"

"I am not —"

"He is *crying*. In the middle of an interrogation. And you are looking at him like —" He stopped. Reassembled. "You cry too well to be this stupid," he said to Luo Binghe, without turning his head. "Or perhaps you are exactly this stupid, and the crying is doing your thinking for you."

He looked between them — the crying one and the one whose face had just betrayed him. The Emperor of the Three Realms, conqueror of nations, keeper of six hundred wives, had never once in his life encountered a situation in which crying *won*. He was now watching it win in real time and he could not identify the mechanism of how tears could possibly be tactically advantageous.

It was like watching a siege tower be defeated by a flower arrangement.

He set it aside. There were other things he could name. He returned, with some relief, to known terrain.

"So," Bingge said. "You found a hidden room full of devotion, failed to identify yourself as the recipient, informed your father he had a lover, watched him become one, and then stood helplessly by while the righteous sects turned the crisis into obscene booklets."

"You're making this sound humiliating."

"I am making it sound chronological."

"I had to find Shizun in a hidden estate behind seventeen layers of spatial distortion," he said. "Tianlang-Jun was a brilliant array master. The task of simply finding the estate was —"

"Caused by the situation you initiated."

"—nearly impossible."

"This is the version of me that was raised with kindness? You did not merely misunderstand. You cultivated misunderstanding like a rare spiritual herb — tended it, watered it, created the ideal conditions for it to flourish. Every step is *deranged*, and yet none of them can be removed without the next becoming impossible."

"It was not—"

"The difficulty of your life was not provided to you. You constructed it, with your own hands, over a period of years, with great consistency."

The Emperor drew breath. It was not a composed breath. It was a breath being asked to do a composed breath's job and it was not qualified.

“And the *suffering of my life*,” he said, “is what you compared this to? You were not oppressed by fate. The heavens did not test you. They watched you test yourself and declined to interfere.”

“It was not easy!”

“I had to become cruel to survive. You became ridiculous while being loved. Your Shizun loved you so much he required *storage space*.”

The Emperor looked at the husband.

He looked at the room.

He looked at the paintings.

“But you are correct," the Emperor said. “It was not easy. Because at every available junction, you took the available decision and made it worse. You built your own pain. Brick by brick. With great commitment. From a foundation of misidentifying your own face in a painting at age fourteen.”

A pause.

“This is impressive. In its way."

He did not say it kindly. He said it the way one might note the structural complexity of a disaster — acknowledging the craftsmanship of the collapse without admiring the result.

“The tragedy is that I understand exactly how you arrived here. And I hate that I can follow the reasoning.”

— Emperor Luo POV —

The Imposter was an idiot. This was established. But the idiocy had a texture to it that Luo Binghe had not anticipated — a recklessness born not of carelessness but of caring too much, in too many directions, with no capacity to contain any of it. The Imposter had manufactured every catastrophe in his life through loving someone so much that the love itself became a hazard.

This was not a kind of failure Luo Binghe had encountered before.

It required some consideration.

“You make me wonder whether suffering made me cruel or merely prevented me from becoming absurd.”

— Omniscient POV —

Across the room, Shen Qingqiu — who had survived the worst of the recap with his dignity in critical condition but his composure technically intact — exhaled and said quietly:

"It's not as though he was genuinely interested in me, in the end."

Bingmei went still. The other one went still. Shen Qingqiu's voice had changed, and everyone in the room had heard it change, and the conversation that had been building toward farce had just crossed into something else entirely.

"Tianlang-Jun. He was not, in the end, interested in me." Shen Qingqiu explained. "He wanted Xin Mo. To merge the realms."

The Emperor's expression had emptied. Whatever had been there before — the contempt, the incredulity, the reluctant investment — was gone. His hand, which had been resting on the edge of the desk, lifted by a fraction. Returned. His body had recognised the word *realms* before his mind could construct a response.

"I completed the realm merge in my world." Flat. Factual. "Decades ago. It was not particularly difficult."

"And you called *me* an idiot — are you *insane*?"Luo Binghe's words came out sharp and accusatory. "You merged — but the cascading instability alone would have killed — the environmental incompatibility makes half the flora in both realms lethal to the other — millions of people — entire species — "

"There were losses." The Emperor said this as if it were a mere footnote in a conquest ledger. "Transitional casualties. Environmental restructuring. Several hundred species failed to adapt."

"Several hundred — "

"The world that told a child he was an abomination for having demon blood does not get to exist as it was." His voice was level. His eyes were not. "The barriers were built to keep demons and humans apart. To make half-bloods impossible. Wrong. I was wrong for existing in a world that had been designed to prevent me."

A pause.

"So I removed the design."

And then, quieter — so quiet it almost wasn't spoken, almost stayed behind the mask where it belonged:

"I thought it would help."

— Luo Binghe POV —

Luo Binghe's knees buckled.

Not visibly — not enough to move, not enough for anyone watching to see. But the structural support behind them simply stopped being there for one second, two, and his hand found the edge of the desk and held on and his breath did something his lungs had not authorised.

I thought it would help.

The words landed in his chest and a sharp recognition stabbed his heart.

Because he had built an empire for Shizun. Had built it gladly, joyfully, with devotion because Shizun was someone worth building for. Every conquest, every alliance, every expansion of the demon realm's influence — all of it laid at Shizun's feet, because Shizun was the *only* reason it meant anything at all.

And the Other One had also built with the same hands and the same power. The building of *his* Empire had been compensation — the largest, most devastating attempt to fill the emptiness in the history of three realms. Millions dead. Hundreds of species erased. Reality itself restructured. And the boy underneath it was still in the woodshed, still pressing against the door, still waiting for someone to open it from the other side.

I thought it would help. Of course he did. Luo Binghe knew that thought — the desperate logic of *if I just build enough, the emptiness will fill*. He had carried it too, during the Tianlang-Jun years, when Shizun's heart seemed to belong elsewhere and the only available response was to build louder, fight harder, become more in the hope that one day he'd be *seen*.

But Luo Binghe had Shizun. The building had a direction. The hunger had a home.

The Other One's building had no direction. His hunger had no home. And *I thought it would help* was the saddest sentence Luo Binghe had ever heard, because it was his sentence too, just aimed at a void instead of a person.

This is me.

This is me without Shizun.

Chapter End Notes

I have read this chapter approximately four hundred times. I no longer know if it's funny. I no longer know if the pivot at the end works. I no longer know if "You cultivated misunderstanding like a rare spiritual herb" is a good line or if I've just stared at it long enough to hallucinate and convince myself that it's good.

If this landed for you (the comedy, the devastation, any of it!) please let me know in the comments, because I genuinely cannot tell anymore and I would be grateful for any

external confirmation that I haven't lost my mind.

In other words: This was the hardest thing I've written in the series. I'm feeling very uncertain about this chapter. Words of affirmation are my love language. Take all that as you will and thank you again for reading!

Chapter 5: The Whole Truth and Nothing But the Truth

Chapter Notes

> Thank you so much for the comments on the last chapter — I read every single one (multiple times) and they genuinely made my week. I cannot tell you how relieved I am that the comedy landed.
>
> Bingge going through what we all went through during SotH, watching the misunderstanding spiral into chaos and reacting to it all was the whole point of the chapter. I felt enormous pressure to get it right. I'm so glad it delivered.
>
> And if any of Bingge's reactions or lines sounded familiar, that's because I went back through your comments on SotH for inspiration and so that Bingge could say all the things you wanted to yell at Bingmei for directly to his face.
>
> That was the comedy chapter. This is not the comedy chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

— Shen Qingqiu —

I thought it would help.

The words still hung where they'd been spoken. Shen Qingqiu could feel them in the silence that followed.

Bingmei's hand was on the desk edge, knuckles white. Shen Qingqiu knew that grip. Had sat with it on the bad nights, put tea in the hands that made it, waited without speaking until it loosened. But Bingmei wasn't spiralling. His eyes were on Bingge, and what was in them was something Shen Qingqiu had never seen on his husband's face before.

Horror. Not at Bingge. *For* him.

Shen Qingqiu had watched his husband look at a man who had merged three realms and killed thousands to fill a void that could not be filled — and recognise something. Not an enemy, not a mirror, but something worse than both: the shape of who he could have been.

And Bingge's mask of cold indifference had cracked. He looked tired. As though holding it in place had stopped being worth the cost.

Shen Qingqiu was the one who had to speak next. Because it was only now, with his husband here, that he could give the full truth behind the paintings.

He stepped forward. The decision landed in his body before the words formed — in his feet, and his hands releasing fists he hadn't realised he was making, and his breath catching once and then steadying the way it steadied in the moment before the brush touched the silk.

"I saw exactly what was supposed to happen to me."

Both faces turned towards him. The resemblance was still disorienting — the same jaw setting, the same brow drawing down. One pair of eyes held the open attention of a man who had spent years learning to listen when Shen Qingqiu spoke. The other held the watchful stillness of decades spent learning when speech was a weapon.

The room changed, and Shen Qingqiu could feel the pressure shift.

Earlier, he had framed it clinically: cruelty used as a language by someone who was never taught another one. Accurate. Safe. Aimed at Bingge's psychology instead of his own. He had stopped at the border of what that knowledge felt like from the inside, at why a man watching his own death approach across years of visions would sit down at the silk anyway.

He could cross that border now with his husband at his side.

"I saw what the emperor did to the person who failed him." His voice found the edge where rehearsed speech ran out and real speech began. "I saw it happen to me. I saw my death in those hands. And I sat down at the silk and I kept painting because I couldn't stop seeing the boy underneath it, and the boy —"

The sentence ran out of structure. The truth had exceeded its container.

"The fear and the grief lived in the same brushstrokes," he said. "I never worked out how to paint one without the other. I painted the person I was afraid of with love because I couldn't separate the child from the emperor. The brush couldn't tell the difference. Neither could I."

Before his husband arrived, Shen Qingqiu had stood in this room and told this man *you're not wrong, but you're not right either*. Had felt the full answer pressing against his teeth and swallowed it. Because saying it without his husband present wouldn't have been fair — would have been handing Bingge a declaration with no counterweight.

His husband was beside him now. He could feel his Luo Binghe's presence the way he could feel a wall at his back — solid, and warm. It gave him the support he needed to say everything he wanted to say.

"You said something to me earlier tonight," Shen Qingqiu said. "You said: *your first response was devotion*."

He watched the words register. The micro-shift behind the mask — a tightening, a bracing.

"I told you that you weren't wrong. And that you weren't right. And I didn't finish."

A breath. There was no elegant framing for what came next, no simple *I had visions* that could carry the weight of it, no clinical distance available. Just a man standing in his own bedroom about to say the thing he'd been holding in.

"You were right. The devotion was for you."

He said it simply. Without qualification. Let it exist in the room as a complete statement before he continued.

Beside him, his Binghe's breath caught. A small, sharp sound. As if he had known this was coming and still wasn't ready for it. A quiet, heartbroken "Shizun" that held no accusation. Only the ache of hearing something true that hurt to hear.

Shen Qingqiu did not turn to comfort his husband. Not yet, not until the rest of it was out. But his hand found his husband's and held on tightly, trying to convey in the grip *please wait* and *I'm not letting go* and *the next part is for you, I promise the next part is for you*.

"It was always for you," he said to Bingge. "Before I ever saw my husband's face. The very first visions I received were of you." The Seer framework held. Barely. He was pressing its edges so hard he could feel the System's attention sharpen somewhere behind his awareness. "I saw a boy in a woodshed and an emperor on a throne and I grieved for the distance between them. I couldn't stop looking. I couldn't stop painting. I refused to stop seeing the person underneath."

He was looking at Bingge directly now. Looking with an artist's gaze, the one that saw what was actually there instead of what was supposed to be there.

"I knew what your hands would do to me. And I stayed at the silk."

His eyes were burning. He did not blink.

"I can't save you. I never could. But the devotion was real, and the grief was real, and the fear was real, and I never stopped."

He let the words land. Did not soften them. Did not qualify.

What he did not say — because it had no business being said in this room, and because there was no one it could ever reach — was that *I never stopped* was not the past tense. A part of him was still at the silk. Would always be. Would go on grieving this man, and loving him, in the only way he had ever been able to — from the wrong side of a distance that nothing could cross. It was the most hopeless thing he carried, and for that exact reason the safest. A love with no one at the far end of it could take nothing from the man standing right beside him, holding his hand.

Then he turned to his Luo Binghe.

The heartbroken *Shizun* from a moment ago was still visible in the set of his mouth — the cost of hearing the truth — but underneath it was the steadiness that Shen Qingqiu had built a life with. The steadiness that had held through the Abyss, through the many years of misunderstandings, through every impossible thing this marriage had absorbed and metabolised and survived.

"And then I met you and you were real," Shen Qingqiu said. To his husband. "I could help. Not just grieve. And I did."

His voice found its ground. This part was not a confession. It was a reminder. The thing they both already knew, spoken aloud because the person behind them needed to hear the distinction.

"I chose you. And you chose me back." He held his husband's gaze. "That's the difference. The devotion to him was real, but he wasn't, and it only went in one direction. Into the silk. Into the paint. Into the grief. It never came back. It was never going to come back, because there was no one on the other side to return it."

He squeezed his Luo Binghe's hand once. Hard.

"You came back from the Abyss, from every terrible thing I put you through — you came back and you had every reason to become him. The same beginning. The same hunger. The same path opening up in front of you, wide enough to walk. You could have had all of it — anyone, everyone, a world arranged around your appetite. It was right there. It would have been easy, and no one would have blamed you for taking it. But you turned it down. You looked at the whole of it and you chose one person and a quiet life. You chose me. I grieved the one who couldn't choose. I married the one who did."

The distinction was made. The life was named. He could have stopped. But Bingmei was watching him with that stillness that meant he was holding something at arm's length, and under the steadiness Shen Qingqiu could see the arithmetic running — could see his husband landing, quietly, on *so I am just the one who happened to be reachable*.

That would not do. His thumb swept across Bingmei's cheekbone.

"Binghe." A breath. "I didn't fall in love with an echo of him. An echo doesn't look at its own face and decide it can't be the one I love. An echo doesn't build a rival out of its own father and then bleed through seventeen barriers to take back what it gave away. An echo doesn't spend its nights teaching hands that had killed to hold a stone without crushing it — for someone it had never been allowed to touch, on the chance that one day it might be."

His husband's mouth opened. Shen Qingqiu braced for the wet-eyed thing that undid him every time.

Instead, the dam broke.

"I paid attention, Shizun." Fast and hot, the way it had all come out of him tonight. "I knew you took your tea bitter and told the kitchen otherwise. I knew you read by the east window because the light there was gentler on your eyes. I learned which step on the walk to the bamboo house creaked, and I learned to skip it, so I would never wake you. I knew you slept on your left side. I knew you woke before the third bell and could not speak to a soul until you'd had your tea. I knew the small breath you let out when an array finally resolved under your hands —" he touched his own throat, just below the jaw "— and I knew you only made it when you thought no one was near enough to hear. I memorised the order you lit the

incense. I knew the days you had not eaten. I was loving you the whole time as I was learning everything about you."

A silence, into which the full scope of this slowly unfolded.

"Stalker," Shen Qingqiu said, under his breath.

"I was attentive—"

"You memorised my breathing patterns, Binghe."

"—because I love you," his husband finished, wounded, as though that settled the matter entirely.

And to him it did. It always had.

All those years — while he had been telling himself the disciple at his heels was dutiful and attentive — Bingmei had been doing this. Gathering him in pieces. Learning the bitter tea and the gentler light and the breath he only let out alone, and saying nothing, for years, because saying it was not yet allowed. Loving him from the wrong side of a window, and asking for nothing back.

He stopped fighting the fondness. He had never once won that fight.

"I know," he said, quietly. A menace and a marvel and *his*. "That was you. Gentle even after everything that was done to make you a weapon. Wrong about almost everything, and never once cruel about it. The most ridiculous man in any world, and I love you — not the figure I painted. *You*. The one who got every step of it wrong and made a catastrophe out of loving me. That was our story. I would not trade one ridiculous day of it. And none of it could ever have been him."

And his husband's face did the thing that Shen Qingqiu had never, in all their years together, learned to watch without his chest cracking open. His Binghe's composure never broke cleanly; it just became transparent, so you could see everything behind it while the structure technically held. His eyes were wet. His jaw was tight. And the expression underneath was not jealousy or hurt or the possessive fury that had once driven him through dimensional barriers to find him. It was something barer — he had just been seen all the way down.

"Shizun." Different from the first time. Not heartbroken. Something fiercer and more fragile, the word pulled out of him the way it always was when Shen Qingqiu said something true and devastating and his only available response was the title that meant everything.

Then, quieter: "Husband."

His hand tightened around Shen Qingqiu's and pulled him closer.

"You saw me." A breath. "You saw me. I love you."

The simplest sentence available to a man who had spent years earning the right to say it — spoken in front of the version of himself who never had.

— Emperor Luo Binghe —

The devotion was for you.

The words landed the way a blade landed when you didn't see it coming — not pain first but pressure, the awareness that something had entered a space it should not be able to reach.

It was always for you.

He had been looked at. Across years. Across visions. A person wearing the face of the man who had beaten him had sat alone in a room and painted his loneliness with steady hands because the loneliness mattered to them. Not as leverage, not as an opening — as a thing that deserved tenderness.

And the fear. That was the part that would not resolve.

I saw my death in those hands. And I stayed at the silk.

Fear did not produce art. Fear of a specific person did not produce years of devotion rendered in exquisite detail, the brush returning to the silk the way a hand returned to a wound it could not stop pressing.

And this person had been afraid of him — had seen the hands that would destroy them — and the fear had produced a painting of him bent over a small fire before dawn, burning offerings, rendered with such tenderness that the word *mother* had pressed against a place Luo Binghe had sealed shut before he was ten.

Something behind the sealed chamber stirred. The place where wanting had lived before the woodshed killed it.

The reaching was happening now. Without permission. The dead thing pressing upward — except there were no fingers in his hair and no voice saying *it's alright*, only words landing in the sealed chamber, and the chamber responding, and the response was not something he could stop.

For a breath — one breath, maybe two — Luo Binghe stood in the path of something he had no word for.

Something that had seen his worst capacity and chosen the boy underneath. Something that feared and stayed. Something that had painted him next to a fire before the sun rose — not a record of his monstrousness, but a record of her. Of the warmth. Of what he had lost.

No one had ever done that. No one had ever looked at the worst of him and responded with: *but the child mattered more.*

His hands, at his sides, opened. He felt his fingers uncurling from the fists he had been holding all evening.

His hands were open. Palms up. The posture of a man receiving something.

He didn't hold his hands like this. His hands had held blades and throats and the reins of empire and the bodies of six hundred women, and not one of those grips had been this — loose, unguarded, the fingers soft. A child's hands. The hands from before the woodshed, from before hands learned to close around things and not let go because letting go was how you lost them.

He did not know he was doing it.

And then Shen Qingqiu turned to the Imposter.

"And then you were real."

The voice changed. Steadier. Warmer. His feet had found solid ground and the voice followed.

"…I could help. Not just grieve and paint. Really help. And I did."

He watched the Imposter look back with an open, unguarded expression that was something his own face had forgotten how to do — the naked gratitude of being chosen, undisguised.

"I chose you. And you chose me back. That's the difference."

The hands of the Emperor of the Three Realms closed. The fists came back — tight, deliberate, the nails finding the crescents they had worn all evening. The child's hands were gone. The emperor's hands were back. He had not decided to make them. They had made themselves, sealing rather than healing, the body protecting what was underneath from further exposure.

"The devotion to him was real — but it went in one direction. Into the silk. Into the paint. Into the grief. It never came back."

It never came back.

"It was never going to come back, because there was no one on the other side to return it."

He had been alive the whole time the brush moved. In his palace, on his throne, behind every wall he had built — standing in the exact place a person would have to stand to be reached. And nothing had reached him. The devotion had crossed worlds to find him and stopped at the silk. Because the silk could hold it, and he could not.

Then the teasing had started. *Stalker*, and the wounded *I was attentive* — accusation and defence tossed back and forth with nothing riding on them, a game with no score, played by two people certain neither could lose. He had watched his own mouth be wounded on purpose, for the pleasure of it. Something in his chest pulled tight. He had interrogated ministers in that exact cadence. He had never once been teased.

The Imposter's breath caught. "Shizun." Then, quieter: "Husband." And then he said: "You saw me. I love you."

The Imposter had said the words so easily. He said it like something he had said before and would say again and expected to go on saying for the rest of his life. The ease was the worst part — it meant the words had a home. Meant they had been spoken enough times to lose their sharp edges, to become habitual, the way *it's alright* was, the way the hand on the small of the back was. The Imposter lived in a world where *I love you* was a thing you said on an ordinary day and meant it and didn't die of it.

He had said the words once, to a woman who washed other people's clothes, before he was old enough to know they could run out. He had not said them since. And now he was watching his own mouth — the same mouth, the exact shape of it — say them like a thing said every morning, worn smooth from use. His face knew how. His face had always known how. He was the only part that had forgotten.

And yet.

Worth grieving for, but not worth choosing.

Worth your devotion, but not your heart.

The heart was the choosing and the being chosen back. And the heart had gone to someone else.

He had been wrong about what was owed, and to whom, and why.

Because the devotion had a source. The Seer had said it, and the words had not stopped sitting in him since: *I saw the boy who was locked in the dark. I saw what was done to him. And I saw that no one helped. And I thought — if I ever had the chance, I would be the person who did.*

The love had not arrived from nowhere. It had grown out of a life watched closely and grieved over — the woodshed, the locked dark, the hunger, the years that had hollowed a boy into an emperor. Someone had seen all of it. *No one helped*, the Seer had said, as though it were the worst line in the whole account, and meant it, and had decided — watching that particular boy go unhelped — to become the one who would.

That boy was him. That life was his. The dark was his, the woodshed was his, the no-one-helped was the truest thing anyone had ever said about him.

And then the Seer had gotten his chance.

And had spent it on someone else.

On the Imposter — who had been steadied, somewhere, by a hand that closed over his before the worst of it landed; who had stayed soft enough afterward to be touched, to be chosen, to say *I love you* on an ordinary evening without cost. The help promised to the boy in the woodshed had been delivered to the boy who had needed less of it. The vow grown from watching him go unhelped had become a marriage to someone who had, somewhere along the line, already been helped.

He went looking for the place where it had gone wrong — the seam to pull, the throat to cut, the error he could correct. There was none. *Nothing*. The Imposter could receive the help for the same reason he had needed less of it. The kindness that made him reachable was the kindness that meant he had never lived it alone.

There had been a Shizun in his life, too.

Not this one. His had never painted anything, never grieved anything, never once looked at the boy in the dark and thought *someone should help him*. His Shizun had been the hand that shut the door. His Shizun had taught him the lesson underneath all the others — that reaching for help was only how you learned the shape of the lock.

For the length of a breath he wanted to have had this one instead. The one who saw. Swap the cruel teacher for the seeing one and wouldn't his whole life come out differently?

But the trap closed before the wanting finished.

Because the seeing one had not come from nowhere. He had seen *him* — the woodshed, the dark, the shut door — and the seeing was the love's whole source. The devotion was owed to a life that had earned it by being unbearable. A boy with a gentle teacher and an ordinary childhood would have been nothing — nothing to grieve, nothing to paint, no reason to make a vow.

His cruel Shizun had made the kind one.

The suffering was the material the love was built from, and his old teacher's cruelty lay underneath every brushstroke, holding it up.

So he could not have had the kind Shizun. Not because the dice fell wrong — because the kind Shizun was the thing his suffering produced. A Luo Binghe spared the dark would have made no one, been grieved by no one, been worth no one's brush.

The thought came flat and enormous, the boy's voice with nothing left to dress it in.

I made it. I made the thing I can't have.

The cruelty done to him — the only inheritance anyone had ever left him — had been turned, somewhere across an impossible distance, into the most tender thing in any world. And the tenderness had gone to the one who never had to make it.

And there was the other thing the Seer had said: *you could have had all of it. Anyone. Everyone. A world arranged around your appetite. And you turned it down.*

Luo Binghe knew that world. He was its emperor — six hundred wives and three merged realms and a throne, the exact life the Seer had named as the thing the Imposter refused. Refused, and was loved for refusing.

Was that the difference, then? Not luck. A choice. The Imposter had stood at the fork and turned towards one person and a quiet room while Luo Binghe had turned towards the empire — and one of them was being held right now and one of them was not.

The unfairness arrived hot and clean — *he had something I never had, a hand on his before the choosing ever came* — and for a moment it had an edge, a place to point.

Then it dissolved, like everything else tonight. Because to turn towards a person, there has to be a person to turn towards. The Imposter could refuse the world because someone had already given him something the world could not. This lord had refused nothing because there had been nothing on the other side of the appetite to refuse it for. The throne was not a wrong turn. It was the only direction the road had ever run. He could not even keep the dignity of having chosen wrong.

Across the room, the two of them stood folded together, foreheads close, speaking in the low voices of people with years left to speak in. No one was looking at him.

The fire painting was on the wall.

His mother. The small fire before dawn, the paper offerings — the secret ritual he kept in the one hour no one was awake, in the place no one would think to look. Himself bent towards the flame, careful with it, not the emperor but a man tending a grief, rendered so fine it showed at the level of individual strokes. The washerwoman who had loved him and died on the floor while he was too young to understand that people could stop being alive. The thing no one was meant to know, painted by someone who had watched it across an impossible distance and loved him through it.

And it hung in the bedroom the Imposter shared with the man who had painted it. Honoured. Lamplit. Kept.

The most beautiful thing in the room was a portrait of his own grief, made with love, and it belonged to *someone else.*

The rage came.

And found nothing to put itself against. Not the Seer, who had loved him and meant it and had said so. Not the Imposter, who had stolen nothing and had only been standing in the room when the love arrived. There was no teacher to break — he had already broken his, and it had changed nothing. No enemy across a field. No one had withheld this, and no one had taken it. The love had been given freely and it had only been given to the Luo Binghe who could hold it.

The heat of anger had nowhere to go, because the cruelty had no throat — it was woven into the plain order of things: that to be loved for surviving, someone has to have been beside you while you did. And he had survived everything alone. You could not put a blade through that.

The boy who had been reaching — sealed back in. The chamber slammed shut, the door kicked closed from the inside, because for two breaths the dead thing had reached and something had reached back and there was nowhere in the world for it to go.

The place where the reaching had been was new. Not the old throne-room emptiness. Shaped like the thing that had almost been there.

The same hands. They had opened once tonight — palms up, a child's hands, learning across two breaths that they could hold a thing without crushing it. They did not open now. There was nothing in the room they were permitted to reach for: not the man in front of him, not the man beside him, not a throat that did not exist. So they reached for the blade. The body went where it had always been sent.

His hand found Xin Mo.

Xin Mo screamed.

Not the blade's usual hunger. Harmonic distortion: two Xin Mos existing in the same room, reality protesting the duplication. The walls cracked. The paintings shuddered on their hooks.

The Imposter's blade was in his hand before Luo Binghe had finished drawing — his body already between the blade and the Seer, one arm sweeping him back towards the wall.

Fast. The soft version was fast. The blade came up textbook-perfect, the spiritual pressure behind it dense enough to distort the air between them.

And wrong. The pressure was wrong. Too much. More than bloodline alone could produce — Luo Binghe knew the ceiling of what their shared blood was capable of, had mapped it across the centuries, and the Imposter was past it. Something had amplified him beyond the limits of what the body they shared should hold.

But in the exchange itself, Luo Binghe was faster.

He had always been faster. Over a hundred years of conquest had refined his technique into something that did not waste a single movement. He pressed the advantage — drove the Imposter back two steps, three, his blade finding the openings that existed in every defence. Because Luo Binghe knew where his own defences thinned. They were his body's limits, and he had spent his life eliminating them.

"You didn't earn this."

The words tore out between strikes. The boy's voice, leaking through the cracks the sealed chamber had left.

"You didn't earn any of it. The paintings — the devotion — the years he spent afraid and grieving and staying — that was *mine*."

A strike that cracked the stone floor. The wrong power flared behind the Imposter's parry. Somewhere under the blades, something small came loose from the wall and fell. Neither of them heard it.

"And you — you catastrophically stupid, face-blind —" The contempt surged up, the incredulity turned weapon, disdain wrapping itself around the grief the way armour wrapped around a wound. "You had it. You had it. Years of devotion, and you thought it was someone else. You didn't deserve a single brushstroke and you got all of them —"

His voice cracked. The contempt could not hold its edge. The fury kept collapsing into the thing underneath, which was not fury at all.

"He saw me first. He painted me. He feared me and he loved me anyway and he never — he never once —"

His technique was degrading. Perfect efficiency fraying as the boy pressed upward through the fighting — uncontrolled, desperate, the wanting that was supposed to be dead refusing to stay buried.

"He never came."

Three words. Barely audible. Not aimed at the Imposter. Not aimed at anyone. The voice of a boy in a woodshed, saying to the dark what he had never been able to say to a face.

"He painted me for years and he never came."

The Imposter did not answer. Did not taunt. Did not press the advantage that the degrading technique was opening. He fought the way a man fought when the person in front of him was not an enemy but a wound — absorbing the blows without returning cruelty for grief.

That restraint was worse than anything the Imposter could have said.

Shen Qingqiu was pressed against the wall, watching. Those green eyes wet.

Don't, he thought. *Don't look at me like that. Don't grieve for me while he holds your heart. Don't you dare.*

Luo Binghe found the killing opening. The fundamental flaw that existed in every version of himself — the place where the boy's desperation had never been fully trained out of the soldier's form.

He drove the blade forward.

The Imposter stepped into it.

Not a dodge. The Imposter stepped forward, directly into the blade's path, took the graze along his ribs, a line of red opening through silk and skin, and used the proximity. Spiritual pressure detonated at the contact point. The wrong power — the amplification that exceeded what their shared blood should permit — poured through the Imposter's hand with a density that should have been impossible. The reckless force of a man trading a wound for a win, because the person behind him was worth bleeding for.

How.

His feet left the ground. His back hit stone. Before his vision cleared, a knee was on his chest and Xin Mo — the Imposter's Xin Mo, the one that did not scream — was at his throat.

Pinned. Looking up at his own face.

The same jaw. The same crimson eyes. The same hands — except the hands above him were steady and Luo Binghe's were not. The Imposter had not spoken through the entire fight. Had absorbed every accusation, every cracked word, every grief-soaked blow without returning a single one.

And his face —

Luo Binghe wanted it to be contempt. Could have used contempt. Contempt was a language he understood, a shape he knew how to hold.

It was not contempt. It was not pity.

It was understanding.

The Imposter was looking at him the way you looked at something you recognised — not abstractly, but from the inside, because you had lived inside the same wanting. Had spent years believing the devotion was for someone else, had choked on jealousy until it poisoned everything, had torn through seventeen dimensional barriers on the strength of a desperation that looked, from certain angles, exactly like this.

The understanding offered no surface. No wall to push against. No thing to destroy. It just sat there, in the Imposter's steady eyes, saying: *I know. I know exactly what this is. And I'm sorry, and I can't fix it, and I won.*

The Imposter's ribs were bleeding. He had not flinched. Had turned his own injury into proximity, certain that anything he lost in this room would be mended by the person he was protecting.

One standing. One on the floor. The standing one had been given the chance to learn what he was fighting for. The one on the floor had never been given the chance — had fought alone, undefeated until tonight. And the defeat had come not from superior technique but from the simple, devastating fact that a man who had something to protect would always beat a man who had nothing but the fight itself.

The unfairness was not the Imposter's fault.

The blade at his throat hummed. Steady. Clear. The sound of a sword that was loved.

Luo Binghe's Xin Mo, fallen from his hand, screamed against the stone floor. The sound of a sword that was used.

The Imposter's Xin Mo sliced the air. A clean, vertical cut — the blade parting dimensional fabric the way a brush parted silk — and the rift yawned open behind Luo Binghe. One stroke, barely shifting his weight from the pinning position. The wrong power rippled through the room.

His own world bled through. Cold. Ozone-sharp. The smell of home, if you could call it that, if home meant the place you had built specifically so that nothing could reach you there.

The message was clear. *Leave.*

The blade lifted from his throat. The knee withdrew. The Imposter stepped back and left the space between Luo Binghe and the rift empty.

Luo Binghe got to his feet.

Slowly. Not because the body required it — the body was already healing. Slowly because the inside was slower than the outside, and what was inside had not yet determined what came next.

He looked at the rift. His world. Grand and cold and designed to prevent being known.

He looked at the room. The cracked floor. The paintings shuddering on their hooks.

His gaze found the wall where the fire painting had hung.

The hook was empty. The painting had fallen during the fight — knocked loose by the harmonic distortion, the spiritual pressure that had cracked the stone. The scroll lay on the floor near the foot of the desk, silk partially unfurled from its wooden rod, the bottom dowel resting against the stone.

The fire burning offerings for his mother. On the floor.

The scroll that had hung on their bedroom wall — honoured, cared for, positioned where the lamplight would catch it — was on the ground because Luo Binghe had drawn a blade in this room and the violence had shaken it loose. It had fallen while he fought, and he had not even heard it fall. His mother's memory on the stone floor. Because of him. The way it had always been because of him — the violence he carried knocking down the things that people tried to keep safe.

His hand moved towards it. Not a decision — a reflex. The emperor's reflex. The reflex of a man who had never been given anything and had therefore learned to take.

A hand closed over the scroll before his.

Shen Qingqiu had crossed the room, and his hand was on the scroll — not snatching, not guarding. Lifting. His fingers closed around the wooden rod and rolled the silk carefully, the way a person handled work they knew the worth of, because the work was his.

He stood. Turned to Luo Binghe. Held it out the way you gave someone something that belonged to them.

Shen Qingqiu's face held recognition. He understood exactly what he was giving, and to whom, and was doing it anyway.

Luo Binghe looked at the scroll in Shen Qingqiu's outstretched hand. His mother's fire, held out to him.

This lord does not accept —

The impulse to refuse — because every exchange in Luo Binghe's life had come with conditions attached, and the absence of conditions was a thing he did not know how to navigate.

The reflex died. Quietly. Without ceremony. It simply stopped working.

He took the scroll.

Their fingers touched at the transfer — both hands on the wooden rod, the silk warm between them. For one breath longer than required, they held it together. The image of the boy and the fire and the mother suspended in the space where giving and receiving overlapped.

He had held things alone his entire life. Blades and throats and the weight of three realms. He had not known that holding something with another person felt different. Lighter. As though the weight were the same but the capacity to bear it had doubled.

Neither acknowledged it. Then Shen Qingqiu let go.

The scroll was in Luo Binghe's hands.

Nothing in his experience had prepared him for this. Not the taking — he knew taking, had made an art and an empire of it. This was the other thing. Being given something. Freely. By a person who owed him nothing.

He held it carefully — the fingers adjusting without instruction to cradle rather than grip. His hands knew how to do this. They had always known. No one had ever put something in them that required it.

Then the Imposter spoke.

"The soul inside my Shizun is not the soul that body was born with."

Shen Qingqiu went rigid. Luo Binghe, still holding the scroll, watched the green eyes go wide.

"It arrived. From somewhere else. Not from this world. The soul that was here before — the original — died. And this one arrived in its place."

"You —" Shen Qingqiu's voice was barely audible. "You knew?"

"Since I was fourteen, Shizun." Quiet. Just a fact, held for years, finally spoken — the way you mentioned a scar you had learned to live with. "I knew the soul had changed. I didn't know where it came from." The ghost of a rueful tenderness. "I built a very detailed wrong answer."

Shen Qingqiu made a sound that might have been a laugh if it weren't also something else entirely. "The Tianlang-Jun thing."

"The Tianlang-Jun thing."

Then the Imposter turned to him. The steady eyes found his.

"If his soul arrived here, in this world," the Imposter said, "then maybe a version of it arrived in yours too. Just not in Shen Qingqiu."

— Shen Qingqiu —

【SPECIAL BONUS EPISODE COMPLETE】

【Reward unlocked: One (1) personal disclosure — identity restriction temporarily lifted.】

The notification pulsed behind his eyes. The System's clinical font. Its complete indifference to the evening that had produced it.

One personal disclosure. Identity restriction temporarily lifted.

Before his husband spoke, he would have known exactly what to do with this — would have turned to him and said *I'm not from this world, I'm not really Shen Qingqiu*. But what his husband just said meant that the secret of his transmigration was not a secret at all. His Luo Binghe had built a beautifully wrong answer from the right evidence and chosen the person over the explanation.

And the Luo Binghe who needed the truth was standing at the rift with a scroll against his chest.

If he said it there — said it aloud, said it whole — his husband would hear every word of it too. One disclosure, both Binghes. And somewhere on the far side of the telling, his own name in his husband's voice, for the first time. The giving and the receiving in the same breath.

"Shen Yuan." He said it the way a man laid something down. "My name is Shen Yuan. Not Shen Qingqiu. Shen Yuan is the person who saw you. Who painted you. Who grieved for you and feared you and stayed at the silk anyway." His eyes stung. "That's the name. The real one. The one behind everything."

A pause.

"If a version of my soul arrived in your world, that's the name it would carry from the world it came from. Not Shen Qingqiu. Shen Yuan. It won't be wearing the face that hurt you. It'll have a different face."

The name settled into the space where the scroll rested against Bingge's chest. *Shen Yuan.* The person behind the brush. The person who had looked at the worst of him and said *but the child mattered more* — not as a man wearing another man's face, but as himself.

— Emperor Luo Binghe —

He had a name now. For the person who had carried the devotion.

And if the soul had arrived in his world —

The thought was too large. Too fragile. He did not dare hold it the way he was holding the scroll — carefully, with hands that had just learned they could receive things without crushing them.

But the name. *Shen Yuan.* It was given freely, like the scroll. Something to look for.

— Shen Qingqiu —

Bingge's mask cracked.

The emperor's composure and the boy's hunger both went quiet at the same time, and what was left was neither. An expression that was so raw that Shen Qingqiu's hand twitched with the impulse to paint it.

Bingge looked at the scroll against his chest.

Looked at the rift.

Looked at Shen Qingqiu.

The look held. The eyes that had been crimson and cold all evening were still crimson, but the cold was gone. What had replaced it was not warmth exactly. Something adjacent to it. The willingness to stand in the path of warmth without flinching. To let it land.

He turned to step through without saying anything.

Shen Qingqiu almost spoke — the grief of watching someone walk away carrying a piece of your heart rendered in paint and silk. But the silence was the right shape. Anything he said now would be for himself, not for Bingge.

The rift closed. The space where Bingge had stood was empty.

Shen Qingqiu stood in it. Looking at the wall. He had not yet turned around.

A hand found the small of his back.

The habitual touch. The anchor.

Shen Qingqiu leaned into his husband's touch. The weight of the evening redistributing against someone who could hold it.

"Shen Yuan."

Luo Binghe said it quietly. Into the silence the evening had left behind.

Shen Qingqiu went still.

"That's who you are. That's who you've always been."

Shen Yuan had died alone and carried his name into this world unused. The name from his past life was a thing that belonged to him but had never belonged here, and now it was in his husband's mouth, and he was saying *Shen Yuan* the way he said *Shizun*, with the tenderness that had never learned to be anything other than itself.

His eyes were very bright.

Binghe's hands found his face and drew their foreheads together.

"A-Yuan."

Shen Qingqiu's breath stopped.

It was the name his parents had used before they'd stopped, before his full name became the distance between them after too many hospital visits. No one had called him A-Yuan since he was small enough to be held — in a life where he had died alone and no one had been there to say any version of his name at all.

And Binghe said it the way Binghe said everything that mattered — instinctively, without rehearsal, finding the tenderest possible form of the name the way his hand found the small of his back. As though he had always known it. As though the name had been waiting in his mouth for the moment it was needed.

Their foreheads pressed together. Breath shared. The closest two people could stand without disappearing into each other.

Shen Qingqiu closed his eyes. Something behind them — the last held thing, the final piece of composure that had survived the evening — let go.

A-Yuan. A-Yuan. A-Yuan.

The name settled into the quiet the way light settled into a room at dawn.

Chapter End Notes

This is the chapter the whole fic was heading towards. The cruelty I wanted to get right with Bingge isn't that he lost the love, or that it went to someone else, or even that he got there too late. It's that there was never a version of events where he could have had it.

The devotion Shen Yuan carries was grown from watching Bingge's life. That suffering is the soil the love grew in. And the same suffering is exactly what burned out of him

whatever it would have taken to receive it. He is the reason the devotion exists and the one person it could never reach.

So when he tries to stallion protagonist his way to figure out what went wrong and what he needs to defeat to get what he wants because that's always been the play — there's nothing there. No villain to vanquish.

Shen Yuan loved him, genuinely, him, and meant it. Bingmei stole nothing because he was just the one standing in the room who'd been steadied early enough to be able to hold the love. The unfairness is real and it has no target and Bingge, who is built on pointing the rage towards the cause of the hurt finds a wound with no one to blame for it.

I didn't want his devastation to be self-pity and I didn't want it to be rage with a costume on. I wanted it to be the quiet devastation of following the logic and finding that the answer was always going to be this, in every version, no matter what he did.

But, of course, I couldn't leave him with nothing.

Chapter 6: Epilogue

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The room was quiet.

The rift had sealed itself an hour ago — the dimensional scarring knitting slowly closed, the air smoothing over the place where reality had been torn. The spiritual residue was fading. The crack the fight had left in the floor was already being absorbed by the palace's self-repairing arrays. By morning, the stone would be seamless. No evidence.

His Shizun was asleep.

It had taken a long time. They had lain together in the Moonfire Silk — which was still warm, which had been warm under someone else's body tonight and Luo Binghe was not thinking about that — and Shizun had talked. Quietly. In fragments. Not the whole of it; there were things he still could not say, and Luo Binghe had learned long ago not to press at the edges of them. But he had said *my name is Shen Yuan* three more times, as though testing whether it would still be true, and each time it was, and the third time his voice cracked on it and Luo Binghe had pulled him closer and pressed his mouth to the crown of his head and held on.

There was a thing Luo Binghe had asked, very carefully, into the dark: *why now*. Why, after all these years, after everything they had built and survived, the name had come only tonight. And Shizun had been quiet a long moment, and then said that he had never been able to say it before — that something in the shape of the world had not allowed it, had kept the name behind his teeth until tonight, and tonight, for reasons he did not fully understand himself, it had finally let go.

Luo Binghe had not pushed. He had spent enough years beside this man to know the difference between a secret kept and a thing genuinely barred, and this was the second kind — he could hear it, the way his voice strained against an edge that would not give. So he had only held him, and turned it over privately, and arrived somewhere that settled it.

Fate had not been cruel in the keeping. It had been waiting. It had held the name back through all the safe years, when no one in the room had needed it, and loosed it tonight, in front of the Other One. The Luo Binghe who had been given nothing, who had stood in their bedroom hungry and alone and heard the true name of the person who had loved the boy underneath. As though the universe, having no other apology to offer the Luo Binghe it had failed, had offered him this.

It was a generous thought, and he knew where the generosity came from. He had spent the evening looking at the Other One — at the hunger, the loneliness, the terrible familiar shape of him — and had not been able to look away from what he was seeing, which was himself, on the far side of a single mercy he had been given and the Other One had not.

A-Yuan had fallen asleep mid-sentence, the way he did when the processing had exhausted him — one moment talking, the next his body deciding that consciousness was no longer required. His hand was still on Luo Binghe's chest. Over the scar.

Luo Binghe was looking at the paintings now.

The lamplight caught the silk — warm, gold, the pigments glowing low. The powerful demon Emperor Luo Binghe had spent so many years measuring himself against. The Other One's face and his own face, because the face was the same and had always been the same, and the difference lived underneath, where the brushstrokes couldn't reach. And the empty hook where the fire scroll had hung until tonight, when it had left in the Other One's hands, pressed to his chest through the rift.

Luo Binghe had looked at these paintings every day since the revelation. Had stood in front of them with wonder, with gratitude, with the quiet joy of having survived the worst misunderstanding of his life and come out the other side knowing he was loved. *It was me. It was always me.* The paintings had been the proof. The anchor. The evidence that Shizun's heart had been his since before they met.

Even after meeting the Other One, they were still all of that.

But now, they were also a record of a real person's suffering — a Luo Binghe without Shen Yuan — hung on a bedroom wall by people to whom that suffering had only ever been beautiful.

He rose from the bed carefully; he had spent years learning to extract himself from his Shizun's sleeping hold without waking him. Shizun murmured something. His hand flexed on the empty space where Luo Binghe's chest had been. Did not wake.

Luo Binghe went to the wall.

The throne painting was largest. He lifted it from its hooks and stood with it a moment. He'd looked at this painting a thousand times — with envy, with pride, with love.

The first time he saw it he had been fourteen, a candle shaking in his hand, certain he had found his rival. He had read only the surface of it then: the knowing tilt of the head, the faint arrogance of the mouth, a man who held power and secrets in equal measure and had never once doubted his place in the world. Binghe had stood in the alcove hating him and wanting to be him and despairing.

This time, he looked to the loneliness that a man named Shen Yuan had seen and grieved for and painted with devotion. He stared at the cold emperor on his throne and noticed something he had never noticed before: the small crescent-shaped marks in the palm of the figure's hands.

He knew those marks. His own palms had carried them once — small bleeding crescents he had pressed into himself in the years before fourteen, in the cold of the woodshed, in every lesson that taught him that reaching for a teacher's warmth was how you learned it would not come. He had stopped without noticing he had stopped. Somewhere in his fourteenth year the

man who punished had become, without explanation, the man who fed him and corrected him gently and let him stay, and his hands had quietly forgotten the habit. He had not thought of it in years.

The figure on the throne had never forgotten. The figure on the throne still made them — because for him, no soul had ever arrived to set the cruelty down.

A real person had stood in this room tonight and looked at this painting and recognized his own hand. His own crescents. His own loneliness, rendered in ink by someone who had never stopped looking for him.

He was still holding it when bare feet sounded on the stone behind him.

Shizun — sleep-rumpled, blinking in the lamplight, his robe slipping off one shoulder — took in the painting in Luo Binghe's hands and the empty hook above it. He did not ask what his husband was doing. He crossed the room and put his hand on the bottom edge of the frame, taking half the weight, and they set it down against the wall together.

Then Shizun reached for the next one, and they did the rest the same way. Together. Two people lifting silk off hooks in the middle of the night, hands meeting on frames, neither of them saying much, because the act was the conversation.

It was at the third painting that Luo Binghe stopped.

It was a smaller one, the emperor in three-quarter profile, a hall stretching away behind him, the scale of it rendering the figure almost incidental. A man made small by the size of the thing he ruled. Luo Binghe had walked past it a thousand times and read it as proof of how much his Shizun had seen. He looked at it now and saw a man alone in an enormous room.

"What was happening here?" he asked quietly. "In this one. What was he — " He stopped. Started again, because the question mattered enough to ask correctly. "Who was he, when you saw this."

Shizun was quiet a moment. Then he told him.

He spoke the way he always had about the visions — careful and unhurried and with a Seer's measured cadence — and Luo Binghe understood he was being given something rare: not the feeling the painting had produced, which he already knew, but the life underneath it. What the hall was. What the emperor had just done, or was about to do, or had done so many times it no longer registered as a choice. The conquests that filled the years. The wives who filled the rooms. The throne that sat at the center of a palace built to be too large to ever feel empty, and the way the emperor tried to fill it and had failed at that, every day, for countless years. Shizun described a man who had everything the world could be made to yield and had been, in the middle of all of it, more alone than the boy in the woodshed had ever been — because the boy had at least still been reaching, and the emperor had stopped.

Luo Binghe listened, and looked at the small figure in the enormous hall, and felt the floor of himself shift.

This is me.

The thought was not new. He had thought it before, the first time he stood in front of these paintings and understood that the man in them was the version of himself that had not been saved. *This is me without Shizun.* He had let it sit in him like a stone ever since — the knowledge that the only thing between his life and that one had been a hand that closed over his grip at the right moment, that he had done nothing to earn his rescue, that the difference between the two of them was the simple grace of the arrival of a soul willing to save Luo Binghe even while Seeing he'd have to give up his life.

He turned the thought over now, in front of the painting, with Shizun's voice still describing the loneliness of a throne, and felt a different kind of gratitude.

Because the hand on his grip had been a gift; the steadying had not been earned. But the steadying was not the same as the choosing. He had still come back from the Abyss. He had still walked away from a path lying wide open in front of him — anyone, everyone, an empire arranged around his wanting — and chosen one person and a quiet life, and become a man who tied his hair back to cook soup. He had made that choice again and again, every ordinary morning for years, and the making of it had cost him things, and the cost was the proof. The rescue was grace. The life he had built on top of it was his — chosen, paid for, kept. A door had opened, and he had walked through it on his own feet.

And tonight, in front of the Other One, Shizun had said as much aloud — *I married the one who did* — and then he had said the rest, the part he had not braced for. He had taken the most private things, the small ridiculous proofs the Other One had spent the evening mocking, and set them out in the open and named them the reason he was loved.

Something in his chest that had braced the whole evening came quietly unbraced. Shizun had never praised the embarrassing parts before. He had not known, until tonight, that those were the parts that could mean so much.

And the Other One —

The grief that rose was clean, this time. He was not holding something that should have been the Other One's because this life was his own, made by his own choosing. What he grieved was simpler, and more bearable to hold: the Other One had never been given the door. The cruelty was not that the Other One had lost the choice — it was that he had never been offered it. *This is the path I did not have to walk to the end*, he thought, looking at the small emperor in the vast hall, *because someone reached me before the walking made me into this.*

He set the study down with the others. Gently. Face out.

They took the rest down together. The smaller studies from the far wall. The silk scrolls. The unfinished pieces. Each one lifted with two hands and set with the growing stack, silk and wood and years of devotion leaning against the wall in the lamplight like a library being gently closed.

The walls emptied.

The room looked different without them. Larger. Bare. The hooks still visible — small shadows where the paint was slightly less faded, the ghosts of frames. The room looked like a place where something had been and wasn't anymore.

The bust Shizun left on the desk. It had always been the piece that undid him. The first time he saw it, the look on that sculpted face had been almost too much to stand: open, unguarded, plainly in love. He had imagined the rival turning that look on Shizun, freely, as though he had every right to it. And Binghe, who wanted to look at Shizun exactly that way and believed he would have to earn the right for the rest of his life, had not been able to breathe around it.

He understood it differently now. He had met the Other One. He had watched the cold emperor's face all evening, and he knew with certainty that the man on the throne could not have looked at anyone like this. The expression had never come from a vision. There had been no rival who wore it. It was something Shizun had put there himself, out of hope — the face he wished the boy in the dark could one day grow into.

And it was his own. It was the exact look Luo Binghe wore now, on any ordinary day, when he watched Shizun across a room and thought nothing at all except that he was there.

That was why it did not go in the chest. He touched the top of its head once, in passing, and left it where it was.

The paintings weren't coming down because the Other One had been right about them being proof of a love he had not earned. They were coming down because the Other One had been real. The subject of these paintings had stood in this room tonight and been hungry and wounded and desperate, and his private suffering — his loneliness, his throne, his crescents — had hung on the walls of someone else's bedroom for years. Admired. Contemplated. Decorated with. That was over.

When the last of it was down, they stood together for a moment in the bare room, and his Shizun's hand found the back of his neck, and neither of them said anything, because there was nothing that needed saying that the empty walls had not already said.

Then Shizun drew his head down, the way he did when words had run out, and kissed him — slow, unhurried, asking for nothing. Luo Binghe's hands settled at his waist and stayed there, loose, unguarded. He had spent the evening watching a version of himself learn that hands could open without taking; his own had known it for years. He let them be gentle now, against the warm familiar weight of the person who had taught them how, and kissed his husband back in the bare room, and for the length of it was nowhere but exactly where he stood.

The paintings went into a chest. Cedar-lined, silk-padded, the kind used for storing things that mattered too much to display and too much to destroy. Luo Binghe closed the lid. A-Yuan's hand settled over his on the latch.

They left the chest in the alcove. The grief was real. Throwing it away would have been saying it hadn't mattered.

And somewhere, on the far side of a sealed seam in the world, one painting was still being looked at.

Three weeks later, Shen Qingqiu sat in the studio with new silk stretched on the frame and a brush in his hand and a problem he had never had before: he could not decide what to paint, because for the first time there was nothing he was afraid of losing.

This was a stranger thing than it sounded. For years, the brush had been an instrument of grief. Every session in the alcove had been him sitting with the worst version of the future and trying to survive it through pigment — the terror of what was coming for a boy who didn't know yet, the helplessness of watching from outside, the desperate private hope that something underneath the emperor might still be reachable. The paintings had been beautiful and exact and full of fear. A way of holding on to someone he was certain he would lose.

Even the gentle ones had been grief. The studies of Binghe as a boy — the disciple at his heels, the sword held wrong when he was tired, the face he made waiting for his cooking to be judged — Shen Qingqiu had painted most of those after the fall, in the years Binghe was clawing through the Abyss and might never climb back out. Painting him from memory had been the only way to keep him from going entirely. He had mourned a living man, rendered every angle of him the way you render someone you are sure you'll only ever have in paint again. Not one brushstroke in that alcove had ever been free of *please don't be gone*.

That had been over for a long time now. His husband was in the next room, and over the past three weeks Shen Qingqiu had filled a surprising amount of silk with the proof of the life they had built together.

There was Luo Binghe cooking — bent over a pot with the focused gravity he brought to every domestic task, as though a soup stock were a campaign to be won. There was Luo Binghe asleep — defenseless with his hand open on the pillow, a man at rest in a room he felt safe in. There was Luo Binghe reading at his desk, frowning at a scroll, one finger holding his place — absorbed, unguarded, unaware he was being looked at.

None of them were *gongbi*. Not one. The alcove style had been all control — formal portraits built layer by meticulous layer, every stroke a commitment, every session ending when his hands cramped because the shadows of a face he might never see again had to be exactly right.

These were *xieyi*. Freehand, loose, fast — the brush chasing a line and trusting it, landing where it wanted instead of where the fear demanded. His shoulders did not hunch. His hands did not cramp. The first few times he had stopped to check whether he was doing it wrong, and he had not been doing it wrong. It was only its unfamiliarity that kept catching him off guard.

Today it was Luo Binghe eating.

He did it the way he did everything — with an unsettling focus, the bowl held in two hands — but when the food was something Shen Qingqiu had praised, a stillness came into his face, a small banked pleasure he tried to keep off it and never quite managed. Shen Qingqiu had

spent years cataloging that expression and never thought to paint it. He painted it now. The downward glance. The almost-smile held in check.

He finished it and set it on the desk to dry, where it lay innocently on top of the very drawer that held the one painting he would *never* allow to be displayed anywhere a guest might see.

It had happened on an afternoon he had decided not to dwell on and was, at present, dwelling on. His husband — sweat-damp and sated, hair a complete catastrophe, propped on one elbow in the wreck of the Moonfire Silk and visibly pleased with himself — had looked at him and said, with the shamelessness he produced only in that bed: *Paint me now, Shizun. Just like this.*

And Shen Qingqiu, Peak Lord, respected cultivator, possessor of what he had until that moment believed to be dignity, had picked up a brush.

(The lighting, in his defense, had been extraordinary.)

That one stayed in the desk and would stay there forever.

From the next room, he heard his husband's voice, asking whether the soup needed more salt.

Everything was perfect.

His palace was exactly as he had left it.

Grand. Cold. The corridors stretching in every direction, each immaculately maintained by servants who moved through the space, efficient and invisible. The way he had always preferred them, because visibility meant proximity and proximity meant the possibility of being known, and being known was the thing the architecture was designed to prevent.

There were six hundred women in this palace.

He did not hate them. That was the thing he kept arriving at. He felt nothing toward them sharp enough to be hatred, and nothing warm enough to be anything else. He had acquired them the way he had acquired territory and treasure and titles — because taking was the only verb he had ever been fluent in, because a man surrounded by six hundred people could tell himself the silence was full.

He wanted them gone.

The thought had arrived over the dimensional seam, in the long fall back into his own world, and it had not announced itself as growth or atonement — it had simply arrived, cold and certain, the way his decisions arrived. He wanted more than this now. That more had a name. And there was no version of the palace that could hold what he wanted while it still held six hundred women he had taken and forgotten.

But he had taken them.

That was the part that would not resolve into a simple order to empty the halls. Whatever he had told himself when he collected them, he had made himself responsible for them the moment he did, and a man did not discharge a responsibility by opening a door and walking away. They would have to be provided for. Stipends for the ones with nowhere to return to. Positions for the ones who wished to stay and make themselves useful in the administration of the empire. Passage and protection home for the great many who would, given a choice he had never once offered them, simply go back to the lives they had been taken from.

And some would resist. He already knew which. The Little Palace Mistress chief among them — who had built an entire self out of her proximity to the throne, who would weep and maneuver and refuse the stipend on principle and insist, against all evidence of his absence, that she, of all of them, was his wife. He would have to find a way to release even the ones who did not wish to be released, without it becoming a cruelty of a different shape.

It would take months to do properly. But he would do it properly. He did not let himself examine why it mattered that it be done properly; the examination led toward a clinical voice saying *you built this to fill the space where love was supposed to go*, and he was not ready to stand there yet.

The fire painting was on his desk.

He had not framed it. Had not hung it; after the bedroom he had stood in, all that silk hung and lamplit and admired on someone else's wall, he could not make himself put it on a wall at all. So it lay half-unrolled across the desk instead, one corner weighted, the lamplight low on the silk. He had not moved it since he returned.

He unrolled it and looked. Himself, bent toward a small fire before dawn. Just a man tending a flame, careful with it, the paper offerings for the washerwoman who had loved him and died when he was a child. The one morning he had never let anyone see. Rendered so fine the grief showed in the strokes.

Rendered by a person named Shen Yuan.

The name had been sitting behind his ribs for three days. *Shen Yuan.* A different soul from somewhere else who had looked at Luo Binghe's life — his suffering, his loneliness, his private hours by a fire — and thought *he matters* and picked up a brush and never stopped.

He did not know where the soul was, or what life it wore now. He knew only that it was somewhere. A soul loosed into his world could have been born into silk or into mud, into a man or a woman or something with scales, under a name he would never think to call. One beam of light, struck through crystal, breaks into a hundred colors at once: every color true, none of them the whole. The soul was like that, and Luo Binghe would know it in any of its prismatic reflections.

Luo Binghe went to see Madam Meiyin.

Meiyin's domain was a pocket of old power, ancient arrays, and the kind of place an emperor could visit but not truly command. She had been here before the empire. She would be here after it.

Luo Binghe stood in it and felt, for the first time in memory, like a petitioner.

"There is a soul I am searching for" he said. No preamble. The clipped imperial precision, for once aimed at something other than intimidation. This information too important for ornament. "It would have arrived here from elsewhere. From another world. It had a name before it arrived. Shen Yuan."

Meiyin regarded him without any hurry at all. She had watched dynasties rise and crumble; she would not be rushed by this one's emperor.

"And you wish to know whether such a soul can be found," she said.

He said nothing. The wanting was visible enough without confirmation.

She rose and went to her instruments — arrays and artifacts that predated the empire by millennia, each tuned to frequencies of spiritual resonance most cultivators could not perceive. She did not touch them. She looked at him. For a long moment, with an attention that had nothing to do with his rank and everything to do with something she was reading off the air around him.

"You carry it," she said at last. "The resonance. Faint — very faint, the way a single touch leaves a trace. You did not know this soul long."

"An hour." It came out before he could weigh it. "Perhaps two."

"An hour." She did not soften it. "A soul-thread spun from an hour is a spider's filament. It exists. I can feel that it exists." She tilted her head. "I cannot follow it. And neither could any stone I might give you to strengthen it, because the trouble is not the stone."

"Then what is the trouble."

"You are." She said it without unkindness, which made it worse. "Come here. Look."

He crossed to her. She raised one hand, and the air between them changed — became legible, somehow, threaded with faint lines of light, hundreds of them, a tangle so dense it had no center. Cords running out from him in every direction, each one thin, each one taut, each one disappearing toward something he had taken and bound to himself and forgotten.

"Every claim you have ever made is a thread," Meiyin said. "Every person you have made yours. You have spent lifetimes acquiring, child, and you never once cut a cord. They are all still here. All still pulling."

She let him look at it. The knot of his whole life.

"Somewhere in that," she said, "is the thread you came to me for. The one that matters. But I cannot find it. You cannot find it. It is a single spider's filament buried under the weight of everything you have ever taken — and there is no instrument in any world that can amplify one strand of a knot. The noise would drown it."

Luo Binghe looked at the tangle of light and understood, with a lurch that had no name, that he had already begun. *I want them gone.* The decision over the seam. The plan for stipends and positions and passage home. His body had reached for the answer days before she put it into words.

"The harem," he said.

"Yes." Her eyes did not leave him. "Every thread that is not the one you seek. You can only strengthen it by subtracting, until the one thread is the only thing left for a stone to sing through."

She lowered her hand. The lights went out.

"There is a stone," she said. "The Heart-Marrow Crystal. It forms in the deepest layer of the Abyss, where the pressure of that place wrings something out of what is left there. It amplifies a single resonance into a thread strong enough to follow. It will do nothing for you while you are a knot of hundreds of threads. But once you are not — once nothing else clamoring over it — the crystal will sing it loud enough to find."

The Abyss. The place he had bricked over with the finality of sealing a tomb. He had sworn he would never go down again.

He said nothing. The answer was not in question; only the price was, and the price had been accepted already, somewhere in the cold place where his decisions waited for his reasons to catch up.

"Bring back the crystal," Meiyin said. "Cut every cord but one. Then come to me, and we will see whether the thread can be followed." She held his eyes. "That is the part you will find easy, in the end. The cutting will hurt and the descent will hurt, but they are within your power, and anything within your power you have always been able to make yourself do."

"And what of the part I will not find easy?"

"Hear this well before you go." She did not raise her voice. She did not need to. "Two souls may resonate across any distance. Yet, know that resonance is not a claim, child. It is only the proof that a bridge could be built — and a bridge is built from *both* shores, or it is not a bridge at all. You may follow the thread to its very end. You may stand on the far bank with everything you have prepared. But you *cannot* cross by force. You cannot take the other shore the way you have taken everything else and call the gap closed."

The words found the exact place where another voice had landed: *I don't think you know the difference between wanting someone and wanting to own the feeling they gave you.*

"The soul must choose you," Meiyin said. "Luo Binghe, you have spent your life making the world yield. But this will not yield simply because you will it so." A pause. "That is the steep part. Steeper than the Abyss. The Abyss only asks you to go down. This asks you to stand still and let someone else decide."

The Emperor of the Three Realms stood in silence for long moment and contemplated the distance between what he was and what he would have to become. It was vast and unmapped and worth crossing.

He said nothing. The mask held. Behind it, something was being rearranged.

Luo Binghe left Meiyin's estate as the sun was setting.

From the outside, nothing had changed about him. Inside, he had rearranged himself.

The name was behind his ribs. *Shen Yuan.* Two syllables that did not weigh what an empire weighed, or a conquest, or a throne. They weighed what a length of painted silk weighs when someone with no reason to give it to you crosses a room and puts it in your hands.

He had to become someone worth choosing.

He did not know how to do this. Had no model for it. He had been feared and obeyed and desired and submitted to, but the choosing was something else, something that required a version of himself he had spent centuries burying, because the version that could be chosen was the version that could be hurt.

The boy in the woodshed. The one who had reached and been hit. The one who had wanted and been taught that wanting was the weakness that got you hurt. The one who was still alive behind the mask, pressing at the door, waiting.

The boy would have to come out — not all at once, not tonight, but eventually, if the search was going to end the way it needed to end, with a person named Shen Yuan looking at him and choosing to stay. The boy would have to be visible. Would have to exist in open air instead of behind the architecture. And the architecture would have to let him, which meant the architecture would have to change.

He did not know how to change it. But he had a direction now, and a task he could begin tomorrow, and six hundred cords he already knew he was going to cut. He had a stone to descend for. He had a name.

I'll find you, Shen Yuan.

He said none of this out loud. He held the name the way he held the painting — carefully, as though it might be taken. But with something underneath the care that was new — not the old hunger that had built an empire to fill the space where love was meant to go or the cold precision that had forced the world to acknowledge him because acknowledgment was all that was on offer.

Something simpler. Something the boy would have recognized, if the boy had ever been allowed to feel it without the feeling being punished.

I'll find you. And when I do, I'll learn how to be found.

He walked. The sun went down. And somewhere — in a life of its own, under a name it had been born to, with no idea that Luo Binghe had begun cutting six hundred threads for its sake

— a soul named Shen Yuan was living a life that could not be taken, and would have to be earned.

Chapter End Notes

And that's A Crueler Mirror. Thank you for staying through all the angst and for trusting me to bring everyone (even Bingge) somewhere better than where they started. Your kudos and comments mean the world to me!

This was really challenging to write. I think because so much of it was driven by Bingge's internal processing. Like, the emotional center of the story is basically a man metabolizing a grief that has no enemy. By the time I got to the comedy chapter, I felt like I forgot how to make things funny. Really happy to see that wasn't the case!

I'm also happy for Shen Yuan to be retiring the most elaborate PIDW merch collection in any realm and appreciating the present life he has with his husband.

And the turn Bingge makes in that last chapter - away from taking, toward becoming someone a person could choose, and then leaving the choosing to someone other than himself. He walks away with a painting, a name, and no promises. That felt like the truest hope I could give him.

From here, you can imagine a version of your favorite Shen Yuan Transmigrates into a Different Person story. I've left it deliberately open for that purpose because there are a lot of wonderful fics with that premise and I love the possibilities of it.

I honestly wasn't planning to write any continuation of this, but that thought alone somehow led me to outline some one-shot what-ifs about Bingge finding Shen Yuan in PIDW wearing different faces. But that will have to wait because my next focus in this fandom will be Love Like a Flood.

Thank you again for reading! See you next time!

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!